Gondolu

and
Two Other Plays
of
Amrutha Someshwara

Translated from Tulu to English by
Sylvia Rego

Karnataka
Tulu Sahithya
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Translation of Tulu plays of Prof. Amrutha Someshwara

Translated by
Sylvia Rego
1-S-16-1037/15, 'Samridhi'
Near Mars & Venus Apts., Spring Fields
Chilimbi, Mangalore - 575 006
Mobile : 9611389376
Email : sylrego@gmail.com

Publisher:
Smt. Poornima
Registrar
Karnataka Tulu Sahithya Academy
Tulu Bhavana, Ashok Nagar Post,
Mangaluru - 575 006
Dakshina Kannada, Karnataka.
Email : tulu.academy@yahoo.co.in
tulusahityaacademy@gmail.com
Phone : 0824 2459389, 7411572115

ISBN: 978-81-996198-5-2
© Karnataka Tulu Sahithya Academy
First Impression : 2025

Size : Demy 1/8

Paper : 70 gsm Maplitho

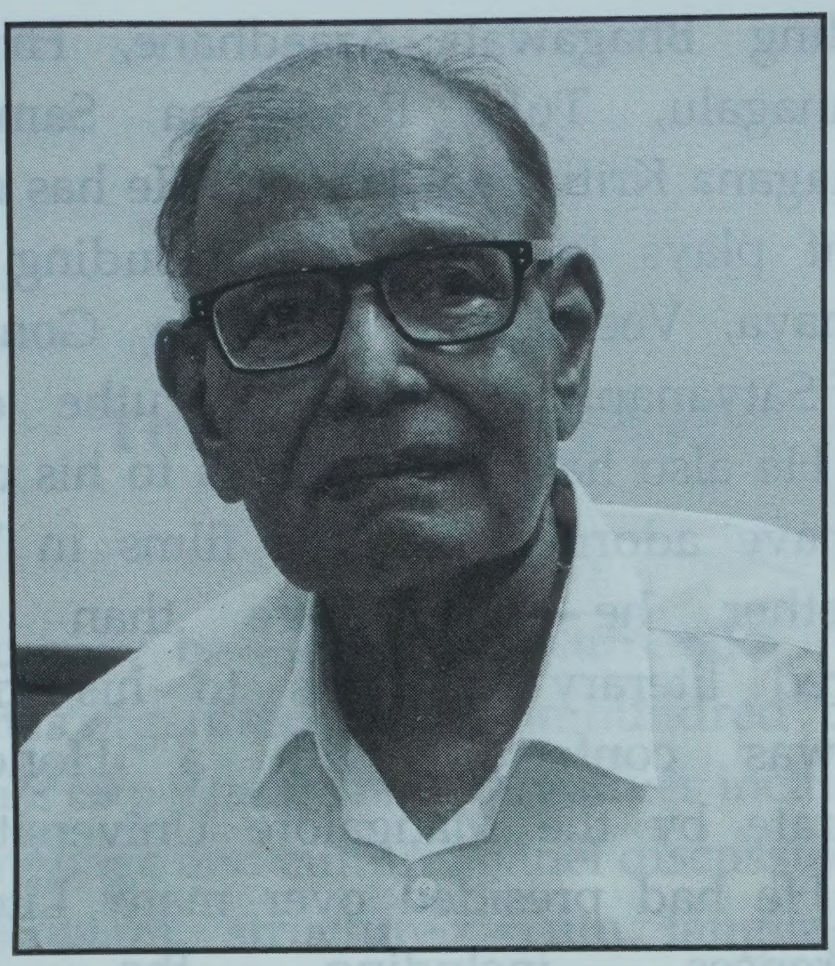
Pages : 188

Price : Rs. 150

Copies : 300

Cover Design: **Kallur Nagesh**

Page Designed & Printed at
Aakrithi Prints
Light House Hill Road, Mangaluru-1
Tel.: 0824 - 2972002 / 7019225774



Amrutha Someshwara

(27.09.1935 - 06.01.2024)

Born in September 1935 at Someshwara Village in the coastal Dakshina Kannada District, he grew into an iconic literary marvel overcoming every kind of hindrances on his way up the ladder of excellence. A Postgraduate in the Study of The Language of Kannada, he went in for teaching as his profession and has served for 35 long years in various colleges before retiring as a Visiting Kannada Professor with the Mangalore University. He has excelled in the field of literature, both in Kannada and Tulu languages. A prolific writer, he had penned more than 30 Yakshagana Prasangas in addition to the research book in Kannada and Tulu

including Bhagawati Araadhane, Hridaya Vachanagalu, Tulu Paadthana Samputa, Yakshagana Kriti Samputa etc. He has many vibrant plays to his credit including Koti Chennaya, Veera Rani Abbakka, Gondolu, Siri of Satyanapura and Raya Ravuthe etc in Tulu. He also has many poems to his credit that have adorned many a films in Tulu. Altogether he has more than three hundred literary creations to his credit. He was conferred with a Honorary Doctorate by the Mangalore University in 2006. He had presided over many Literary Conferences including the First World Tulu Conference and the First All India Tulu Literacy conference. He has received various awards and honours including Bhasha Sarıman award from Kendra sahithya academy (2017), Karnataka Tulu Sahithya Academy Award (1998), Karnataka Rajyotsava Award (1999), Ku. Shi. Haridasa Bhatta Award (2000), Alva's Nudisiri Award (2004), Yakshagana Award from Mangalore University (2014), among others.

The President's Words

As you may be aware, the Karnataka Tulu Sahitya Academy has organised more than hundred programmes over the past two years. These initiatives include seminars on Tulu language and culture, panel discussions featuring eminent scholars, structured Tulu language learning classes, curated Tulu reading sessions and the recognition and felicitation of distinguished folk scholars who have made significant contributions to the cultural heritage of the region. A particularly noteworthy accomplishment of the Academy is the translation of the Preamble of the Indian Constitution into Tulu and its distribution across schools, colleges and various local associations in and around Mangalore.

The Academy places great importance on book publication by inviting proposals from authors. It actively encourages the translation of significant works from and into Tulu, contributing to the effort to take the language beyond its geographical boundaries.

Tulu is considered one of the Dravidian languages, and some researchers have proposed hypotheses suggesting its deep connections with African linguistic roots or even African–Sumerian language families. One frequently cited piece of evidence is that the word Tulu/Tul means 'wet/gentle/watery' in Coastal Karnataka, Ethiopia and parts of Africa. It is important that this line of research is to be carried forward.

Although UNESCO has classified Tulu as an endangered language in its surveys, the Tulu Academy has been consistently active for many years, striving to keep the language vibrant. It continues to make efforts to introduce Tulu into school and college curricula and encourages younger generations to speak and read the language.

As part of the Academy's activities, I am delighted to present an important translated work, Dr. Sylvia Rego's translation of Amrutha Someshwar's plays. Amrutha Someshwar is one of the foremost writers of Coastal Karnataka who, like Tagore of Bengal and Shivaram Karanth of Karnataka, engaged deeply with modern ideas that transcend conventional genres. We are proud to present Prof Someshwars's works in translation, which will make him reach a wider audience. Dr. Rego has rendered these plays into English without compromising their inner essence.

In remembering Amrutha Someshwar, I extend my sincere congratulations to Dr. Rego for this significant contribution to the Tuluva literary landscape. My sincere thanks to late Amrutha Someshwara's family for granted the permission to publish this book. I trust that this work will receive scholarly attention across the country.

I look forward to witnessing many more such meaningful publications in the future.

Tharanatha Gatti Kapikad
Chairperson
Karnataka Tulu Sahithya Academy
Mangaluru

Foreword

Folklore, myths, literatures, theatre and cinema form the narrative substratum of any society. They also have the ability to shape and mould society. Folktales, myths, legends, and proverbs contest the iniquities and unjust economic, social, gender related structures. These stories, plays and indigenous oral folk narratives not only represent a reality which is almost tangible, but at times also assume a supernatural or divine sanction. In today's times when we have every kind of information at our fingertips we may not feel that these ancient stories have any place in society. However, these tales and myths, as A.K. Ramanujan reminds us, act as a lens through which we can understand the psyche of Indian society and the problems therein.

One of the vehicles for exploring the answers to the questions on the aforesaid iniquities and dehumanising aspects of society is in understanding the people's narratives before exploring or articulating the acceptable ways in which people deal with the complex multiplicity of relationships in society.

Tulu folklore is a living tradition steeped in the agricultural framework and is predominantly manifested in the forms of Bhootharadhane (Deity worship) propitiating the bhoothas (deities) for protecting their crops, lands and people. It is a repertoire of narratives depicting in detail the beliefs, practices, thoughts, customs and manners, worships, sports, occupations, kinships, gender relationships, caste and polity. The narratives draw our attention to the exploitation of the lower sections in society thereby in a way, lending voice to the voiceless. They offer a platform to express the resistance to exploitation in the world of the daivas and spirits. The characters of the supernatural world often interact with the real world and rectify the situation brought about by accidents, actions or misdeeds of the real world characters. In fact, the so-called supernatural world is just an extension of the real world.

Professor Amrutha Someshwara's contribution to the Tulu and Kannada world of culture, folklore, theatre, and literature is tremendous, and includes his Tulu translation of the Finnish oral epic, *Kalevala*.In the current translation, Someshwara's Tulu plays, *Gondolu*, *Raya Ravuthe* and *Siri of Satyanapura* are commentaries on and representations of the traditional social, economic, political and cultural dynamics of which representation of gender has been prominent. The women characters like Siri challenge male hegemony and resist being subservient to man. Characters

like Siri and Debe provide a woman's perspective of the world but are portrayed as transgressive women as they live in and juggle with their conflicting and hostile masculinist surroundings. Tulu plays, particularly those of Prof. Someshwara, have contributed greatly to the rich legacy of theatre in this region, of which Kannada and Konkani too are an essential part. Translations of this genre are needed to bring the rich and vibrant tapestry of the cultures of this region to a larger audience.

Dr Alwyn Vincent D'Sa
Professor of English
Registrar, St Aloysius College (Autonomous)
Mangaluru

Three Tulu Plays by Prof. Amrutha Someshwara: **The Exploration of Newness in Tulu Theatre**

Coastal Karnataka represents a culturally and linguistically layered region, shaped by the coexistence of multiple languages and diverse cultural practices. Its social landscape is marked by plural identities and long-standing patterns of interaction among communities. Within this wider context, Dakshina Kannada occupies a particularly distinctive place. For several centuries, Kannada has not been the primary language for many of the region's communities. On the other hand, Tulu has historically been the principal language of majority of its indigenous population for years.The linguistic ecology of the region, however, extends well beyond Tulu. Languages such as Koraga, Konkani, Beary, Havyaka Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, and several others continue to be spoken within different communities, contributing to a setting defined by multilingualism and cultural continuity. The emergence of Kannada as the dominant administrative language can be traced to the interventions of the Vijayanagara Empire, when Kannada was institutionalized as the medium of governance. This shift placed Tulu and other local languages in a secondary position, a hierarchical arrangement that continues to shape linguistic practices in the present day.

Tulu seemed to begin receiving formal recognition as a scholarly and literary language only with the systematic efforts of the Basel Mission. The publication of a Tulu grammar in 1872 and the compilation of a Tulu–English dictionary in 1886 marked significant early steps in establishing the language within academic and literary domains. Yet, despite these contributions, Tulu has not been integrated into the primary education system, where Kannada continues to occupy the central position. The incorporation of modern literary ideas and aesthetic forms into Tulu writing also emerged relatively late, particularly when compared with the development of Kannada and several other major Indian languages.

Kannada, as one of India's major literary languages, engaged early with modern intellectual currents and new literary forms. Kannada theatre in Mangalore was active as early as 1892, whereas systematic theatrical activity in Tulu emerged only in the 1930s. From the 1960s onward, Tulu theatre expanded steadily, shaped by playwrights such as Kemtur Doddanna Shetty and K. N. Tailor. Their works addressed contemporary social issues and everyday life, giving Tulu theatre a distinct local grounding, even as they remained relatively detached from classical Indian aesthetics and modern rationalist ideas.

In this wider historical and cultural setting, Prof. Amrutha Someshwara stands out as a key figure who brought modern dramaturgical ideas into Tulu theatre. His plays skillfully blend classical Indian theatrical techniques with themes shaped by modern thinking. Importantly, Someshwara stayed deeply connected to Tulu cultural and mythological stories, avoiding influences from outside literary traditions. Much of the performance style he used was adapted from local Tulu folk traditions and showcased the region's unique theatrical heritage.

In the following discussion, we explore the structure of Prof Someshwara's three plays, which support the perspectives outlined above:

Gondolu

Gondolu, published in 1987, can be regarded as the first independent modern drama in Tulu to engage with rational and contemporary ideas. Earlier, in 1980, Prof. Amrutha Someshwara had translated Chandrashekhara Kambar's *Jokumara Swamy* into Tulu. His translation did more than render the text accessible to Tulu readers, rather it reshaped the narrative within the cultural world of the Tulu region. In doing so, Prof. Someshwara drew inspiration from Kannada playwrights such as Kambara and Girish Karnad, while simultaneously seeking his own creative path in introducing novelty to Tulu theatrical writing.

Gondolu unfolds within a feudal social order where power and fear determine the lives of ordinary people. The *Pergade*, who functions as the *Kanaguthu Gurkara*, pressures his tenant *Kanthu* to send his wife Debe for his sexual pleasure. One day, in Kanthu's absence, the Pergade arrives at their home, demands that *Debe* submit to him, and attempts to assault her. *Debe* defends herself with a glaive and kills him. Overwhelmed by fear and the consequences of her act, she takes her own life. In local belief, her story does not end there. *Debe*, with her acts of resistance and tragedy associated with it, finds a connection among the deities of the land, reminding us of how violence, resistance, and honour are folded into the region's ritual imagination.

The tragedy carries echoes of Shakespearean works such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, where conflicts driven by domination, desire, and human frailty shape

the narrative. In *Gondolu*, Prof. Someshwara uses familiar elements of Indian theatrical practice, including the *Sutradhara* and *Melada Pada*, yet the central story remains rooted in Tulu mythology and is interpreted through a modern sensibility.

As a work of theatre, *Gondolu* stands as a significant milestone in the development of modern drama in Indian regional languages. It is noteworthy that B. V. Karanth staged a production of this play about twenty-five years ago, a testament to its artistic depth and continuing relevance.

Sathyanapurotha Siri

The *Siri* cult occupies an important place among the significant ritual traditions of the Tulu region. Alongside *Bhuta* and *Naga* worship, it forms one of the three major ritual systems, each anchored in its own mythological narrative. Prof. Someshwara has drawn upon this tradition to craft a play based on the mythic life of *Siri*.

In this drama, the full span of *Siri*'s story is adapted into a theatrical form. *Siri* is presented as a woman endowed with divine powers from birth. Her life takes a difficult turn when she is married into a feudal household and later discovers her husband's extramarital relationship. Refusing injustice, she leaves the family and eventually enters into a second marriage. Over time, and through suffering, resilience, and transformation, she attains the status of a deity in local belief.

The play unfolds across twenty scenes, allowing the Tulu mythological narrative to emerge with clarity and emotional depth. The techniques employed in its staging are both distinctive and innovative within the context of Tulu theatre, reflecting Prof. Someshwara's continued effort to expand the expressive possibilities of the form.

Raya Ravuthe

Prof. Someshwara's play *Raya Ravutha* takes yet another distinctive narrative path. It explores the tragic inner world of Queen *Neelammaji,* whose forbidden and destructive affection for her son, *Somanatha* shapes the play's central conflict. The prince survives her attempts to harm him and later becomes the King's horseman, while the queen, devastated by guilt, ends her life. The tragedy carries thoughtful resonances with the Greek play *Oedipus Rex,* though it remains deeply rooted in the moral and emotional world of the Tulu region.

Across these works, Prof. Someshwara's contributions illustrate how Tulu theatre has been reshaped in conversation with local myths, regional histories, and broader aesthetic traditions. His plays demonstrate the capacity of Tulu literature to engage with modern ideas while drawing strength from its cultural and ritual foundations.

It is indeed meaningful that plays significant to the Tulu language are being translated into English, which makes them accessible to a wider audience. Moreover, this will enrich the English literary world while helping readers beyond coastal Karnataka to understand Tulu culture better.

Dr Prithviraj Kavathar
MISHA, MAHE, Manipal
Dr Praveen K. Shetty,
MIT, MAHE, Manipal

Contents

1.	The President's Words	Tharanatha Gatti Kapikad	5
2.	Foreword	Dr Alwyn V. D'Sa	7
3.	Three Tulu Plays by Prof. Amrutha Someshwara: The Exploration of Newness in Tulu Theatre	Dr Prithviraj Kavathar Dr Praveen K. Shetty	10
4.	Siri of Satyanapura		16-63
5.	Gondolu		64-122
6.	The King's Horseman (*Raya Ravuthe*)		123-187

Siri of Satyanapura

Scene One

[The rendition of a song in the strain of a *paddana* can be heard in the background…]

In Satyanapura, the palace of Birumalva is blessed by Berema of North Lankaloka with the birth of a daughter called Satyaloka's Siri… Kanthu Punja of Batthakeri manor of North Basrur takes the hand of Siri in marriage … The offense of offering a sari to Siri, on the occasion of her pregnancy-ritual… defiled after it is first worn by another paramour…Siri is angry with her husband and stays on at Satyanapura… The baby boy Satyakumara is born on the new moon of a Tuesday under the zodiac sign of Leo … Narayana, Lord Narayana…

[Siri has laid the infant Kumara in the cradle in the palace at Satyanapura, and is soothing the baby with a lullaby.]

My beloved child, heir of Satyanapura
The breath of my being, sleep…sleep
My jewel prince of the world of Truth
Beloved coral most precious, sleep
My chain of gold,
Treasure of my good fortune,
My divine ornament, sleep

Siri : Daru, O Daru!

[Daru calls out in response from the cowshed]

Daru, the baby has fallen asleep. Grandfather too is sleeping. I shall go and wash Kumar's soiled clothes at Sanne-stream, and return.

Daru : [From where she is] Don't, *Akka*. I will wash them later.

Siri : Today I would like to wash the clothes. I will be back soon.

Daru : Alright, *Akka*. I shall milk the tawny cow, then go to our vegetable garden and return. Please don't be late.

[Siri fills a small basket with the baby's soiled clothes and goes towards Sanne stream. Daru milks the cow and goes to the vegetable-patch to get vegetables. After a while Kumar wakes up. He cries softly at first and then begins to bawl. Birumalva who is sleeping on the cot in the room inside wakes up all at once. He gets up with a bamboo stick for support.]

Birumalva : Why is the baby bawling? Siri, O Siri, where have you gone, child? The baby is crying, dear! Here, Daru, O Daru, where are you? Daru, are you dead? Have you gone deaf, girl? Daru, O Daru! Siri, O Siri! *Che*! Just where have they gone, leaving the baby? Have they any sense? *Aiyyo*! The baby must be hungry. Or perhaps he has stomach pain...He is crying incessantly [He paces up and down, not knowing what to do.]

Aiyyo! What am I to do? I am forbidden to see the baby's face! Let what has to happen, happen. What have I to achieve anymore? Can anyone know about our life-span and our future? Let me once look at my beloved grandson to my heart's content. I shall hug him. I will kiss him. This is the right time...

[He comes quickly and lifts the baby from the cradle. He sees him with widened eyes, pulls the baby to his chest, dances and showers love on him.]

Birumalva : Come, my golden plantain-sapling, my beloved baby! You are my ruby-lamp of Satyanapura. You are the apple of my eye. You are my most precious jewel. Don't cry, baby... don't cry, baby... Sleep... baby... sleep... you are the light of my fortune... my pearl-tassel... My parched eyes are appeased, my burning heart is satiated. Baby Kumara, smile, my child, smile... sleep...

[He sits with the child on the wooden plank in the hall, joy welling up within him. He caresses the baby's head and strokes his back gently to pacify the baby. His face is aglow as tears trickle down his eyes. Just then Siri comes running in. On seeing this scene she panics immediately.]

Siri : *Ajja*, O *Ajja*!...

[She screams. Pulling the baby from the old man's hands, embraces him and kisses him. She addresses *Ajja*]

Siri : *Ajja*, why did you go close to the baby? Don't you know you must never?

[*Ajja* does not utter a word.]

Siri : *Ajja*, O *Ajja*...[She shakes his body and calls out. The old man's body rolls over to one side and falls. Siri's heart lurches and she feels she has lost the strength in her limbs.]

Siri : *Ajja*, you have devastated me! *Ajja*, what have you done? Who will lead me now? Who do I have anymore?

[Daru enters and is frightened on seeing all this.]

Siri : Daru, what is this that has happened? Has my *Ajja* left me in the twinkling of an eye? Daru, how can I believe this? Who do we have now to fall back on?

Daru : *Aiyyo Akka,* I too could not hear the baby's cries. While we were gone *Ajja* must have found it hard to curb his love and he might have embraced the baby. *Akka,* calm down.

Siri : How do I calm myself, Daru? How do I live without my *Ajja* who fed me well and brought me up with such great love? *Ajja,* O *Ajja*! How did you have the heart to leave your beloved Siri?... Just tell me once... *Aiyyo,* O my fate! *Aiyyo,* Daru... O *Bermer*...

Daru : What can we possibly do? Can spilt milk be brought back? Isn't there a separate Being who transacts and keeps track of all our earthly accounts? You must fortify your mind. Don't we have to make further arrangements?

[Both of them place *Ajja*'s corpse on a mat in the south-north position.]

Siri : Daru, call Abbanna. Let him take a palm-note to Basrur manor.

[Daru sets out. Siri writes a note on a palm leaf with a large iron needle, tears streaming down her face.]

[Abbanna and another tenant called Bagga come in. They prostrate before *Ajja*'s corpse and express their grief.]

Siri : [Gives the rolled palm-note.] Abbanna, go to Basur manor as soon as possible and give this letter to Punja, and bring him along.

Abbanna : Alright, *Akka.*

Siri : Bagga, make preparations to collect wood for *Ajja*'s bier. Will you cut the mango tree on the other side of the

stream and the jackfruit tree on this side of it?

Bagga : I will make preparations for the bier. [He leaves.]

[Two halves of a coconut with wicks and oil in them are lit near the head and feet of the dead body. While Siri sits sadly at his feet, mournful music plays on.]

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Scene Two

[The Basrur Batthakeri manor. Abbanna arrives. Kanthu Punja recognises him.]

Kanthu Punja : Who's that? Abbanna? There's water in the baling bucket. Wash your hands and feet.

[Abbanna washes his face, hands, and feet, and comes.]

Kanthu Punja : Hm. Why have you come, Abbanna?

Abbanna : Satyanapura's *Akka* has given a palm-note, sir. [Gives it.]

Punja : Is it? What's the matter? [Unrolls the leaf and reads. He smiles] Oho! Satyanapura's old man's game is up, is it? Then how much longer should he live, man? [Sees the note again.] Siri feels she has no one to support her? None to guide her? Why does she want protection? And why does she need anyone to direct her? She's someone who would kick both the ball and the field! Hm. Look here, Abbanna.

Do a thing. Shankar Alva from Sood is the old man's closest relative. Let him conduct the last rites. I can't say for sure, but I might come. I will write a palm-note to Shankar Alva. Give it to him as soon as you can, and then proceed to Satyanapura. Let the preparations for the funeral be done. Say that I will come.

Abbanna : Alright, sir. Try to reach there as soon as you can.

[Punja writes a note and gives it. Abbanna bows and leaves. Punja smiles to himself.]

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Scene Three

[Abbanna comes to Shankar Alva's house at Sood. He meets the latter by the side of the rice-field path.]

Shankar Alva : Who's that? Abbanna? Looks like you come in great haste? What's special?

Abbanna : Satyanapura's *Ajja* has passed away, sir.

Shankar Alva : Is my uncle dead? *Aiyyayyo*! What happened to the old man? He was as strong as a rock?

Abbanna : He was old, wasn't he? I have been to Basrur manor to relay the news of his death. Kanthu Punja has sent you a palm-note. [Gives it. Shankar Alva opens it and begins to read.]

Abbanna : Permit me to leave. I must return fast to Satyanapura.

Shankar Alva : Go to the house and eat a bite before you leave.

Abbanna : There's no time, sir.

Shankar Alva : In that case at least a tender coconut... But you will have to go up the tree.

Abbanna : No, thanks. I shall leave, sir. Come soon.

Shankar Alva : Alright.

[Abbanna leaves. Shankar Alva reads the letter.]

"Dear Shankar Alva, Kanthu Punja from Basrur manor writes to you that Satyanapura's *Ajja* has died. Siri passed this news to me. But I am not willing to carry his hearse. She wrote she is orphaned and has none to guide and support her. You are his relative. Complete all the necessary rites. This is also a good occasion for you to assert your right to a large share of the property. You have my support always. I shall not go there. Be there and manage everything. We can talk of further developments later. *Namaskar*.

Kanthu Punja"

Shankar Alva : Ha ha ha. What Kanthu Punja says is right. This is an opportune moment to stake my claim. The old man has already given me a small share of the property and some money. How will all that ever suffice? Now let's find a gap and firmly drive home the chisel. [He makes mental calculations.]

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Scene Four

[At Satyanapura, *Ajja*'s dead body has been bathed and decorated with flowers and sacred basil. Siri is seated near the head, and Daru at the feet of the corpse. Shankar Alva comes in sweating profusely. As soon as he enters he pretends to be very mournful and begins to wail.]

Shankar Alva : *Aiyyo Ajja*! Have you abandoned us and gone? Went away without speaking a single word to us? Didn't you say much earlier that I was to inherit the headship and authority of this manor? *Aiyyo*, O *Ajja*!

[Siri jerks her head up once and looks at him. He stops lamenting for a moment, and wipes his face with the upper cloth.] Siri *Appe*, who can challenge what the gods have ordained? *Ajja* has completed his days very well, got up, and left. Now don't we need to look after our affairs? [He prostrates completely before the feet of the dead man.] Siri, hasn't anyone else from the village come here? I will call them. Leave the rest to me. Poor helpless woman that you are! What could you do?

Siri : Shankar Alva, nothing can hinder *Ajja*'s funeral. Fortunately for me, I have the support of *Bermer*.

Shankar Alva : [Humbly] I don't mean it that way, *Appe*. Do not trouble yourself about anything. Don't be sad that your husband has not shown up. I will repay the debt I owe to *Ajja* by seeing to it that his last rites are smoothly performed without the smallest hitch. Have no fear. However, one thing must be confirmed straight away. There should be no low

wrangling later on... I shall look after all the outer administration of the manor of Satyanapura. You must give this to me in writing. You can take care of the internal supervision of the manor very well. That way, it will be good for all concerned, in every respect. *Ajja* too will rest in peace.

Siri : [Not showing any interest in this matter] Why talk of the internal and external management of the manor while we still have the corpse of *Ajja* lying before us? Let us first see to *Ajja*'s cremation and gathering of the ashes.

Shankar Alva : After the ashes, you will ask me to wait until the period of pollution and mourning is over, and other death-rites are completed. All that won't do. One thing has to be decided now for sure. Make over the supervision of the land belonging to the manor!

Siri : What are you saying, Alva? How could you even have the heart to speak thus now?

Shankar Alva : Isn't it best that those things that need to be done get done at the earliest?

Siri: [Getting a little angry] *Ajja* has already given you a share of the property thrice. He has given you land to cultivate, yoke and plough, ox and seed, and all agricultural implements as well. He has already given you everything right from the coconut-shell for salt and the vessel to boil milk, down to the peg and

rope to tether the cocks. Take care of all that and then return. You don't need to worry about the administration of Satyanapura.

Shankar Alva : [Mocking] How easily you say this! Where will my rights to the land vanish? I know how to summon a council of the revered *panchayat* elders over the division of the property, and get the landlordship of Satyanapura. To whom else would *Ajja*'s ring for the headship of religious rituals go, if not to me?

Siri : [Getting more annoyed] I told you not to provoke me at this moment! The headship-ring will fit my finger just as well. Besides, my son Kumar is also there. As for you, you do not stand a chance of getting authority over anything here, worth the smallest stick!

Shankar Alva : Let's see who will get the headship! Look here, Siri. A woman should remain a woman, stay modest and accommodative. If a hen grows a comb on its head it does not become a cock. Are you telling me I don't stand a chance? Let's see who will touch *Ajja*'s dead body!

Siri : Don't imagine you can frighten me! No one need touch *Ajja*'s body. I have my *Bermer*. I have nothing to fear!

Shankar Alva : Alright. Let's see about that!

[He leaves, shaking violently with rage. Silence for a while.]

Daru : [Shuddering] *Akka,* what can we do now?

Siri : Don't be afraid, Daru. Isn't God on the side of those who have none? Let Abbanna and Bagga make arrangements for the pyre. We ourselves will carry *Ajja*'s hearse and cremate him.

Daru : Alright, *Akka*.

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Scene Five

[Shankar Alva is walking along. He uses skillful persuasion and prevents people going towards Satyanapura from attending *Ajja's* funeral.]

First person : Where are you going, Shankar Alva? Aren't you coming to Satyanapura?

Shankar Alva : Why should I go? Just to get humiliated, is it?

Second person : Why do you say that?

Shankar Alva : You know that Siri who is *Ajja*'s most beloved foster child, don't you? She believes she does not need anyone now! I told her in all sincerity that I would look after the external administration of the manor, since she was a woman and would find it difficult to manage it. Isn't there justice in what I said?

First person : What was her response to that?

Shankar Alva : She glared at me like a tiger! I am *Ajja*'s surviving kin. And she says I have no rights there!

Second person : See, Shankar Alva, *Ajja* had already given you your share, hadn't he?

Shankar Alva : Now let that be! If he scooped out a small measure of paddy from a granary that's full to the brim, will that suffice? Now who's there at Satyanapura to offer security and protection? Am I not the only male head there to give proper guidance and direction? Can't she understand even this much? Siri's husband too is not going to attend the funeral. When I take pity on her and offer help she comes forth to fight! *Kaliyuga* indeed!

First person : In that case, what's your plan?

Shankar Alva : Not just mine. The decision of all the *gurkars* of the village must be unanimous! I shall tell the others as well. You too should tell them. Unless justice is properly done none should attend *Ajja*'s last rites. A woman needs advice and admonition. When I explain things in a nice manner she promptly begins crowing excessively.

First person : Why is she so obstinate?

Shankar Alva : That's the result of all the cossetting done by *Ajja*. It doesn't matter how, but I must get the headship of Satyanapura by norms of justice. I shall now make arrangements to call a meeting of the village elders. Let her cremate *Ajja* on her own. Let the mourning period and the ritual feast get over. None in the surrounding houses nor in manors bound by bonds of mutual help must

show up for the last rites!

Second person : Still, would it be right to do that, Shankar Alva?

Shankar Alva : Everything will be alright. Justice should be done as it is. [He puts his hand into his pocket.] Here, let this be with you. Take it. Do not hesitate. This is not a bribe! [He gives a bribe to both of them. They grin and take it.]

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Scene Six

[*Ajja*'s dead body is laid on an unbroken plantain leaf.]

Siri : Daru, come. We have the good fortune of repaying *Ajja*'s debt by carrying his corpse today! By the grace of *Bermer*, *Ajja's* body will be as light as a string of flowers! Lend your shoulder where the feet are, and my palm will lift his head.

[They veil their heads with white cloth and bend to carry the body. Bagga and Abbanna walk ahead holding a new unbaked mud pot with live coal and a flaming torch.

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Scene Seven

[A scene where the pyre is burning in the distance. Siri, Daru, Abbanna, and Bagga return from the crematorium. Twilight.]

Siri : Have a bath and come. Let us eat a morsel of rice-gruel in *Ajja's* name. For someone like me who has no one to call her own, you are my kinsfolk. Daru, there's hot water, isn't there?

Daru : Yes, *Akka*.

[A standing lamp is burning. At a little distance, Siri is seen on a mat holding Kumara, and looking worried.

Daru pours oil from a small oil-vessel into the lamp. There isn't the least sound.]

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Scene Eight

[Shankar Alva and Kanthu Punja are talking in Basrur Batthakeri manor.]

Kanthu Punja : You did a good job, Shankar Alva. You saw to it that no one attended the funeral of the old man of Satyanapura, didn't you? The overbearing behaviour of that haughty Siri must be stopped! Let her eat the ritual meal on the thirteenth day all by herself.

Shankar Alva : It's good that you did not go! Had you gone, you would have been insulted!

Punja : Am I mad to carry the old man's corpse? Why would I want a conflict by meddling in the affairs of a wife who humiliated me before all the people gathered at her pregnancy-ritual ceremony, and as good as relegated me to the world of the dead even when I am still alive? But her pride must be broken! You go ahead in this matter, and I will support you from behind.

Shankar Alva : I have directed all the honourable members of the *panchayat* regarding the assembly I have called for. The meeting will be arranged beneath the beach-almond tree the day after tomorrow.

Punja : The *gurkars* are on our side, aren't they?

Shankar Alva : I have set everything right! Where can the shrimp in the cooking pot jump? … It would be good if you too could attend the *panchayat* assembly.

Punja : I have no objection to that. But I will not make myself conspicuous. Being short-tempered, Siri will flare up if her eyes fall on me. So I shall remain like the fruit hidden behind the leaf.

Shankar Alva : Fine. As long as I have your support there's no doubt I will get the headship of Satyanapura.

Punja : What's there to doubt? If her rights to Satyanapura are cut off her insolence will shrivel up. She will fall at my feet like a bird whose wings are broken. You go ahead with your work.

[Shankar Alva leaves.]

Scene Nine

[Siri is trying to pacify the baby in the cradle and put him to sleep. Daru comes.]

Daru : *Akka,* Obayya has come bearing a letter for you from the assembly of the village *panchayat*.

Siri : Is that so? [She comes out. She sees Obayya.] Sit down, Obayya. How come you are here?

Obayya : There's no time to sit. All the honourable village elders have gathered in the assembly of the *panchayat* under the large beach-almond tree. Dignitaries from the upper region of the village, respected men from the lower region, landlords with agricultural land, wise men from four corners, traders and accountants from the town, and all *gurkars* have gathered for the meeting. Akka, this letter is sent to you asking you to attend the council.

[He gives the letter.]

Siri : Daru, give Obayya a drink to quench his thirst. [Reads the letter.] Tell me, Obayya, it's barely a few months since *Ajja* passed away, and my tears haven't yet dried up. How can I attend the meeting?

Obayya : That's true, *Akka.* But the village elders have made this decision. Can it be brushed aside?

Siri : Alright. Let all those who want to, come. You go ahead. I shall come as soon as I can.

Obayya : [Drinks] Alright, *Akka*. [Leaves]

Siri : Daru, it looks like a bleak future is round the corner. This *panchayat* must have been summoned at the behest of Shankar Alva. Basrur manor might secretly have a hand in this. Never mind. One must honour a letter of invitation. Let's see what will happen!

Daru : Shankar Alva will flip over anyhow like a viper fallen supine. Go with great caution, and return quickly.

Siri : If Kumara wakes up feed him a *poobare* banana, and give him some of the tawny-cow's milk. Where's the palm-leaf umbrella? Go and get the sword with bells on the handle.

[Daru brings them. Siri holds the umbrella and the sword, and sets off for the *panchayat* meeting.]

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Scene Ten

[The members of the *panchayat* tribunal are eating beaten-rice, jaggery, and winter-cherry served on plantain leaves. Shankar Alva is pacing around in agitation. In the distance, Siri can be seen approaching. The whispers in the assembly stop. When Siri comes to the spot, some stand up respectfully.]

The *gurkar* of the assembly: Come, come, *Akka* of Satyanapura.

Another member : [Showing a three-legged stool] Sit on this stool, *Akka*.

Siri : O Elders! That was the stool from which my *Ajja* would pronounce judgement at *panchayat* meetings. I shall not sit on it. I shall sit here instead.

[Siri turns the palm-leaf umbrella and sits on one side of it. Her head is covered with the sari-end.]

Siri : You sent a letter asking me to attend the tribunal of the elders. There is no cause for any quarrel now. I honoured the letter sent by the village elders and came here. Tell me why you sent for me.

[For a while all gathered are left staring at one another. Then one of the *gurkars* gives a small cough and clears his throat.]

Gurkar : Satyanapura's *Ajja* was a virtuous soul, and a veritable *Dharmaraya*. He has reached heaven. You had to be summoned here because Satyanapura does not have any male support right now. Shankar Alva of Sood has explained everything in detail to us. Now all of us must get together and pass a resolution that all the events and affairs of Satyanapura be managed beautifully while ensuring that all help is extended to you and no injustice is done to Shankar Alva.

Siri : [A little surprised.] I do not know why there is such a need for it now. No matter how difficult, I shall see to the management of all the affairs at

Satyanapura on my own. Where is the issue of passing a resolution in this matter?

Another Gurkar : That's not it, *Akka*. All said and done, you are a woman after all. Ten eyes and ten hands will not suffice to supervise the internal and external affairs of Satyanapura ... Now let that be. What have you to say, Shankar Alva?

Shankar Alva : [With fake humility] I bow my head before all the village elders. It is said that there are pearls of wisdom in the assembly of wise men in authority. The other day when *Ajja* passed away, I had gone to Satyanapura to discharge my duties towards him and offer my service. My words were of no value though I spoke in the interest of the manor and tried to be of help to Siri *Akka*. So I had to turn round and return. I am someone who even now desires the welfare of Satyanapura. As the beloved nephew of *Ajja*, what I request of the elders is to grant that Siri *Akka* continue to take good care of the internal matters of the manor and I be allowed to manage the external affairs of Satyanapura. I ask the *panchayat* to pass a resolution to this effect.

A third person : [Looking here and there] There's justice in what Shankar Alva says. There is no other male offspring in *Ajja's* family. Besides, Shankar Alva used to manage the affairs of Satyanapura in the past. So

the decision to let him have the headship of Satyanapura would be a natural one.

Siri : [Expressing objection] How can the village elders be taking such a decision? I am there to take care of *Ajja's* manor and land. Leave the affairs of Satyanapura to me.

Another person : That's not possible, *Appe*. You are too young and inexperienced. The administration of manors is not meant for women. It is that power which has to be obtained after offering a special ritual to the manor's *bhuta,* signalling the transfer of authority.

Shankar Alva : Will the wise elders of the tribunal give room for female rule at Satyanapura?

Siri : My son can be the head of the manor if you wish.

Another person : [Laughing] *Che*! That's a mere infant! Siri *Akka*, you must open up your mind and stop being stubborn.

Siri : [In a very firm voice] I shall not give room for injustice. There's no justice in what you say.

Third person : Aren't we there to decide what is just and what unjust?

Shankar Alva : You must listen to a word of mine. If I am not to have the headship of Satyanapura manor, I will let that pass. Instead let all the moveable and fixed assets of Satyanapura be divided equally; give me my half of it.

Another person : If that's the case, so be it. That too is fine. What do you say, Siri *Akka*?

Siri : I stand by what I have said. Let Shankar Alva not covet to have rights over any portion of Satyanapura. *Ajja* had already given him a share of the wealth of Satyanapura thrice over. He shall never get even a broomstick more than that!

Another person : *Akka*, you will have to abide by the decision of the *panchayat*.

Siri : Must I bow my head before such a cunningly executed resolution?

Third person : Just what do you take the resolution of the tribunal for?

Siri : I have understood everything. I know why you, who ought to show the path of justice, speak this way. Truth, ethics, and justice have all perished along with Satyanapura's *Ajja*. Will such a deceitful and dangerous tribunal escape annihilation? It doesn't matter if I am meted out injustice. It doesn't matter if I have to wander to far off places as a destitute. It's all the will of *Brahma Deva*. Permit me to leave.

[Getting up with a jerk, she saunters out with the palm-leaf umbrella, without waiting for a response. There is commotion in the *panchayat* assembly. After a while they sidle out one by one.]

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Scene Eleven

[Siri returns to Satyanapura. Her face glows with bitter rage.]

Daru : You have returned, *Akka*? Your face looks crestfallen. What happened at the *panchayat* meeting, *Akka*?

Siri : What could happen? I knew all along that this was what would happen at the meeting... All our ties with Satyanapura are now severed. The very water of this place has turned noxious now. I am not the kind who will ever linger here a moment longer.

Daru : [Frightened] Where could we possibly go from the manor and life here, *Akka?*

Siri : They say that those who are ruined head towards the southern region. Come along with me if you wish to. If you desire to remain here, slaving away as Shankar Alva's servant, then remain here. I shall not stay in this village of injustice. I shall never make over my life and fortune here to someone else and still hover around here... Daru, will you come with me, or...

Daru : [With fondness] *Akka*, I am the one who has all along looked after you so well. I shall ever remain your shadow, *Akka.*

Siri : In that case, don't delay. I shall not climb up the steps of the manor. You go in to the women's apartment in the south and untie Kumara's cradle of pure gold.

Keep it here on the raised seat around this coconut tree.

[Daru goes to the inner apartment and brings Kumara along with the cradle. Siri picks the baby up.]

Bring the sealed box containing the money offered to *Brahma Deva* of Lanke Lokanadu after Kumara was born, tied up on the cane used for drying clothes.

[Daru goes in and gets it.]

Kumara, this is what we get as fruit of our meritorious actions, son. We have to go as destitutes without any destination. Our relationship with Satyanapura has always been as close as that between milk and water. But now that's finished…Daru, fetch a little of the milk drawn from the tawny cow.

[Daru brings a bowl of milk. Siri feeds the baby with the milk from a small bowl. When the baby's eyes begin to droop she places him in the cradle.] Daru, carry the cradle. Let us depart.

[She places the cradle on Daru's head. They circumambulate the *tulsi* plant and set out.] Don't turn back and see, Daru. Let's move on.

[They turn their back on Satyanapura and move on.]

Daru : [Agonised] *Akka*, women's lamentation and men's screams can be heard from the direction of Satyanapura! Tongues of fire are visible!

Siri : I told you not to turn back and see… Can Shankar Alva of Sood ever get Satyanapura, the land of truth? I pray to *Brahma Deva* to spare my beloved Kumara's silver shrine, and *Ajja's* inner apartment. Likewise, may the cowshed with the tawny cow and its calf be spared.

[They turn their back on Satyanapura and leave.]

A *paddana* can be heard in the background…

In this manner Siri departs from that place… Arrives at the northern border of the region of Bermer's Lanka Lokanadu… She praises Bermer and fulfils her vow by offering a fist of money… Narayana, Narayana…

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Scene Twelve

[The house of the harlot Siddu. Kanthu Punja and Siddu are sitting on the swing.]

Siddu : You haven't drunk enough milk today. Nor have you eaten the bananas. Do eat the *poobare* bananas.

Punja : Never mind, Siddu. You are the *poobare* banana of my life. Why other bananas?

Siddu : [Giggling] Oh, is that so? So be it… [Folds a betel leaf.] Here, have a betel leaf. The white-lime used as a paste here is no common lime from shells of clams. This lime has been made by burning pearls.

Punja : Even if pearls are burnt, you will still receive more of them, won't you?

Siddu : Now that's the way to speak. You have been sitting for so long, face all swollen up. Who are you mad at?

Punja : Mad? At whom? At least not at you, and that's for sure.

Siddu : I don't know what it is, but something seems to have happened. You are hiding it from me.

Punja : *Che, che*! Why would I keep any secret from you?

Siddu : In that case, tell me. By the way, Siri's pregnancy-ceremony must have got over?

Punja : All that is over.

Siddu : Then why didn't you come visiting? I presumed you too would go along to Satyanapura and remain there.

Punja : [Rejecting the very idea.] Am I crazy?

Siddu : Then why haven't you come this way? I have stretched my body standing on tip-toes, and I have been craning my neck all this while. See how long my neck has grown!

Punja : [Seriously] Siddu, everything has turned topsy-turvy.

Siddu : What's it? Explain the matter.

Punja : Siddu, you should not have worn the sari I bought the other day for Siri's pregnancy-ceremony.

Siddu : So what if I wore it? Did its gold-embroidered border fall off? Didn't I fold it carefully and return it as it was? What was defiled by my wearing it?

Punja : You have no idea. Siri understood that you had worn it.

Siddu : Really? How's that possible?

Punja : She was born of Truth, you understand? She came to know everything. All in all, I am in great trouble!

Siddu : What happened?

Punja : She humiliated me in the presence of all the village elders gathered. She refused to wear the sari I gave her at the pregnancy-ceremony. She insulted me saying the sari had been worn by a harlot.

Siddu : What a haughty woman your Siri is! Men splash in slush and wash in a stream. There's nothing new in that. Are there women of this kind too in this world, who dishonour their husbands?

Punja : In any case, I have fulfilled my obligation at the pregnancy-ritual. She killed me while I still live, and left for Satyanapura.

Siddu : If she has left, she will return. And if she doesn't, am I not there? Am I insolent like your Siri?

Punja : Siri is fine if she's pleased, but a blazing *Maari* if angry!

Siddu : Then what am I?

Punja : You are *Lekke Siri*!

Siddu : What? You compare me to a *bhoota*?

Punja : *Che, che*! You are not an evil spirit, but a deity of wealth, a *daiva*.

Siddu : That's only lip-service. Sometimes you stay so aloof and distance yourself from me.

Punja : I speak the truth, Siddu. I just might go away from Siri, but never from you. That's for sure!

Siddu : Really? Then I am truly blessed. [She hugs Punja.]

Punja : Then I shall meet you this evening. I

have some work now.

Siddu : [coquettish] Come fast. Don't keep me waiting. And bring a roll of flowers when you come along. I have a *Pooja* today.

Punja : Why one? I will get two. Let the *Pooja* be a grand one!

[Punja starts to leave. Siddu bursts into a sluttish laugh.]

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Scene Thirteen

[Basrur Battakeri manor. Sankaru Punjedi, Kanthu Punja's mother, sees Siri coming from afar.]

Sankaru Punjedi : Look yonder, Kanthu. Who's that coming here? She does look like our Siri, I tell you! Why has she come here?

Punja : Yes. How astonishing! I cannot figure out if she is coming here in triumph, or in defeat. We did not give her any present after her delivery. Nor did we attend the cradling ceremony. And now she is coming here, cradle and all? You pacify her. If she enquires about me, tell her I have gone to pay the tax-installment at Kaderi Karla.

[Goes in and hides.]

[Siri and Daru come to the courtyard of the manor.

Siri is holding Kumara. Sankaru Punjedi comes with a flat metal plate containing ash-water.]

Punjedi : Who is that, child? Is it Siri? Have you brought the baby? Have you come on this inauspicious Tuesday, in this scorching heat? The baby has withered like a flower. Let me see. I will ward off the evil-eye. [Takes the ash-water plate. But Siri does not let her do it, and brushes her hand aside.]

Siri : O *Mami*, why all this hospitality? Where has your son, the man who took my hand in marriage, the lord of Basrur manor gone?

Punjedi : He will be here presently, my child. Come in. Let us hang the baby's cradle in the living room. Feed milk to the baby. Why do you stand there in the courtyard? Come in.

Siri : Forget this business of coming in. Where had all this love disappeared till now, *Mami*? The master of Basrur manor, your son, had promised to look after the affairs of Satyanapura manor along with that of Basrur manor. But he never once set foot there. Though I sent a letter when *Ajja* died, he did not turn up. He joined hands with Shankar Alva of Sood, and conspired with him in calling an assembly of the village elders. They were bribed to give their verdict in favour of Shankar Alva. I gave up Satyanapura and left the place. What other desire would I have thereafter?

Whose help do I have? I have my *Bermer*.

Punjedi : Siri, just forget all that has happened in the past, my child. Let us have a compromise and at least live together henceforth. Place your right foot forward and enter the house.

Siri : [Firmly] I am not someone who has come here coveting the gold and wealth at Basrur manor. Let that be. Where has your son gone?

Punjedi : He has gone to pay the amount for the last installment of the tax, my child.

Siri : [Mocking] Even though your skin has wrinkled with age, you will not give up the vice of telling lies! Has your son gone to pay the last installment, or has he gone to the house of the harlot Siddu in the last part of the town?

Punjedi : Don't say such things, my child.

Siri : "My child, my child" orally, malice concealed in the belly! Tell the truth. Isn't your son sleeping in the dark, on the large stone-chest inside, all covered up and concealed? If you utter a lie, I will have no scruples in disrespecting you. I might even call you by name.

Punjedi : What? What did you say? Showing insolence and crossing limits? [Loudly] O Kantho, where are you? Will you let me get admonished by the woman whose hand you took? Can you hear what she is saying?

[At this point Punja comes out, shaking in anger.]

Punja : Who is that, Mother, cawing like a crow

in our courtyard? Rattling off a long catalogue like a fortune-teller?

Punjedi : That's your beloved wife, whose hand you took! Satyanapura's landlady, Siri! Enacting a drama in the middle of the courtyard. If I call her in she refuses to come.

Punja : Oh! Is it Siri? What a surprise! We did not give any present at the ceremony after her delivery, nor did we invite her to come here bearing the cradle and child. Now why have you come in this blazing heat to the courtyard of our manor?

Siri : Oho! So the landlord of the manor is here? Did you return so quickly after paying the last instalment of tax?... You ask why I have come without an invitation, right? I haven't come here eyeing the wealth and fortune of Basrur manor. You have ever hastened to my side in all my joys and sorrows! What does it matter if I have such a husband or don't? Get the necessary witnesses and dissolve this marriage! I shall leave.

Punja : Oho! How easily you say that! No one has said such a thing till now. A woman must remain by the hearth within the house. It is said that if a frog grows too fat it will not stay in the pond, and if a girl grows lustful she will not remain in the house.

Siri : Keep your tongue in check! Don't you dare speak to me the way you talk to the harlot Siddu!

Punja : Why do you poke your nose into her affairs? Has she come begging to your doorstep? You are a haughty woman whose teeth have been broken. You are the field that has transgressed its border!

Siri : What did you say?

Punja : A woman who has transgressed the honour of her natal home reminds you of a decoction with excessive ginger in it. Are you the one who should teach me how to speak to you?

Siri : It's your time now to speak, and mine to listen. Never mind that. Get the witnesses and give me a divorce. I have reached my tether's end!

Punja : A marriage cannot be dissolved in this way. Go and bring your maternal guardians.

Siri : When my family was around, I had my maternal relatives with me. Now I do not have any. As far as I am concerned, this baby Kumara, born of my womb, is my man – strong and courageous. Get the witness and divorce me!

Punja : Just anything can come off that uncontrollable tongue of yours! Are you setting up the son born to me to stand against me as your male guardian?

Siri : If that does not satisfy you then let us do it this way. [She takes a branch of the physic nut tree growing along the hedge and brings it.] Here, consider this branch of the physic nut tree my maternal kin. Now dissolve the marriage! If you

don't, then I will. Here, then. Take these symbols of my marital state that are in your name! Keep them for yourself! [She tugs at her bangles and throws them. She yanks the chain off her neck and flings it at the base of the pillar. Then her hand goes to her nose to take off the nose-ring.]

Punja : What? Are you going to take off your nose-ring and consign me to the league of the dead?

Siri : [Stops awhile.] Fine. I shall show some regard for these words. Women must henceforth escape the fate of the living dead, suffering injustice as the husband's slave. After divorcing the husband, a woman must get the opportunity of marrying a second time and be accorded the marital status of a fortunate woman once again. Therefore I shall continue to wear the nose-ring.

Punja : [Gnashing his teeth] O arrogant woman! You have crossed all restraints of authority. You have forfeited all rights of sustenance – milk and water – at Basrur manor. The woman who descends the steps of this house will not be called back. If you cross the ford of the river at the boundary of this manor by sundown, that shall be considered your divorce. If you fail to cross it, then I will hold you by your hair and drag you back. I will set you to slog in the manor and break your pride!

Siri : [Laughs derisively] As if you have the courage! Fold up this boastful prattle! Daru, take the cradle. Let's leave.

[They leave. Punja scowls and enters the house. Punjedi seems helpless, and keeps gazing at Siri moving away very fast.]

Paddana

Ah…ah… Siri turns her back on Battakeri Manor and walks away. Through her divine power she crosses the ford in the river. She obtains the grace of Kenchamma Devi…

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Scene Fourteen

[Siri goes towards the base of a banyan tree near Abanadka, close to Bola plateau.]

Siri : Daru, we have come a long way. Perhaps you are tired with all the walking? Let us tie the cradle to a branch of this tree.

[Daru ties the cradle to a tree-branch. Siri feeds the baby Kumara with milk and puts him to sleep.] Daru, wash Kumar's clothes at the stream and return.

[Daru leaves. Siri sings the *Gili Rama* song and lulls the baby.]

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Scene Fifteen

[Boliya Desinga and Karia Kasinga, the landlords of Bola Mallige manor have come on a hunting expedition. They have stopped at a spot to chew betel leaves. They sit, eating betel nuts and leaves.]

Desinge : It looks like all the others have been left behind at the hunting spot. We have come a long way, chasing the boar.

Kasinge : It's quite alright even if we miss the young boar. This deep forest gives such delight to the mind!

Desinge : Yes, oh, yes! The kind of rare and delightful treasure we would never find in the town, though we search high and low, is found in the forest.

Kasinge : It is not the hunt that is important. It is this joy that is!

[Siri's song can be heard.]

Desinge : Oh, Kasinge, What's that we hear?

Kasinge : [Hearkening] It's surely not the call of birds, nor the sound of animals. It sounds more like the voice of a girl.

Desinge : [With curiosity] Yes, it is a very beautiful song.

Kasinge : This is indeed astonishing, I say. Which girl would come to such a place as this? I wonder if it is a water-nymph.

Desinge : Let's go and find out whether it is a water-nymph or a forest-nymph!

Kasinge : I tell you, the notes of that song are drawing me there!

Desinge : I was bewitched by that song even before you were. Now let us lay down

some conditions between the two of us. Whoever goes first and touches the girl will get her for himself!

Kasinge : Alright, *Anna*. Come, let's sprint then.

[Both run towards Siri. Siri sees them, and is stunned. Her song stops. She guesses the covetousness in their minds.]

Siri : Stop, stop. Why are you running, my brothers? Whoever reaches first is my elder brother and the one who comes next is my younger brother. [The brothers stop short, look at each other's face, and then at Siri.]

What is it, my brothers? Why do you stare at each other?

Desinge : You have tied us up in knots, all in the name of siblings and their bond. So be it. It's all for the best. Let us accept you as our younger sister, right, Brother?

Kasinge : Yes, *Anna*. This is the fortune that has come our way without our asking for it!

Siri : I am pleased. Would you tell me who you are?

Desinge : We are Bolabari Kshatriyas. We were born and brought up at Bola Mallige manor. I am the elder brother, Boliya Desinge. This is my younger brother, Karia Kasinge. We had come on a hunting expedition. We heard your melodious voice and came running. Would you tell us who you are, Dear?

Siri : What can I tell you about my life, Brothers? Have you heard the name Satyanapura?

Kasinge : Oh, oh! Certainly!

Siri : I am the daughter that *BirumAjja* got by the grace of *Bermer*. My name is Balekke Siri.

[The remaining story is briefly shown symbolically, the mouth miming the action.]

Desinge : My eyes well up with tears on hearing your tale, sister. In one sense, we are indeed very fortunate. We do not have any sister in our family. Let us shoulder all your responsibilities. Let us go to the palace!

Kasinge : Yes, Siri. You can live in peace and comfort at the palace of Bola Mallige.

Siri : I bow before your large-heartedness. I too wish to go with you and live as your beloved sister. But then, if I come right away in this state with you, it will simply let indecent and impertinent people wag their tongues. They will tarnish my family name and accuse of moral deficiencies. So come to take me along according to the norms of propriety. I will come.

Desinge : That too is correct. We shall come to take you as it befits your dignity.

Siri : Alright. I will be right here.

[Desinge and Kasinge leave.]

Paddana

Daru says she would not accompany her to the Bola manor.
Daru says she must be sent to the world of the divine…
Siri permits her to enter into the divine realm of Maya
Daru becomes the Jaala Baikati Daiva, protector of women…
Kumara says he will not go to Bola manor

He asks her to send him to the Ethereal world.

Siri performs a divine act and sends him above to the Miri world… Narayana, Narayana.

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Scene Sixteen

[The landlords of Bola Mallige …..]

Siri : Oh, my brothers! Have you come?

Desinga : Yes, Siri. As befits your stature, we have come with musical horns, in pomp, bearing a palanquin. Get up. By the way, you are alone, aren't you?

Siri : Since my Kumara and Daaru did not agree to come along, they insisted that they must leave this world and enter the divine world. So I made them enter the ethereal world.

Kasinge : Is that so? You are the daughter of Truth. Your glory is great!

Desinge : Come, Dear. Sit in the palanquin.

[Siri sits humbly in the palanquin which now leaves for Bola Manor.]

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Scene Seventeen

[In the manor of Bola, Siri and the kings are in conversation.]

Desinge : What is the use of having all the blessings in the world? Can a house without a woman in it ever be a home? Now it seems like our palace has become prosperous!

Kasinge : It is as if a spring has burst forth in a dry well.

Desinge : It is as if a ruby has lit up a golden shrine.

Siri : Why are you singing my praises? You brought a destitute like me here, with great love, and gave a new direction to my life. Can this debt be repaid ever?

Kasinge : It is only because we were destined to that we have become true siblings. What can match this good fortune?

Desinge : You must relax and live in the palace. We will see to it that you suffer no discomfort and boredom.

Siri : I owe all this to the grace of *Bermer*!

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Scene Eighteen

[Desinge and Kasinge are talking near the large field close to Bola manor.]

Desinge : Brother, now I understand how great is the love brothers and sisters share.

Kasinge : Yes, *Anna*. It looks like Siri has now forgotten all her past sorrow and is living a joyful life.

Desinge : But then, there's still one thing. It's quite true that she is happy. But isn't life more beautiful when one lives in accordance with what is appropriate at every stage of life? Siri is still very young. If everything is suitable, then there is no reason why she should not marry again.

Kasinge : *Anna*, I feel the same way. It would be good if Siri, as a beautiful vine, had the firm support of a suitable man. But we must get to know what she wishes, mustn't we?

Desinge : That we need to find out. By the way, as milk is to water, we have always been very close to Kotpar Alva from Kotradi town. He keeps visiting us very regularly. But hasn't it been a while since he came by?

Kasinge : When I thought of Siri's future, it was Kotpar Alva who came to mind too. It is better to quickly perform the marriage if he agrees to it.

Desinge : How will he have the heart to agree to a second marriage when his first wife Saamu Alvedi is yet alive?

Kasinge : Let him have a look at Siri first. Let us see about other matters later!

Desinge : It would be best if the two of them saw each other and agreed. Let us not compel them. Let us write a palm-leaf letter asking him to visit us once. Couldn't he do this?

Kasinge : Alright, *Anna*. Let's do just that.

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Scene Nineteen

[The house of Kotpar Alva of Kotradi. He is in the midst of the preparation of rice-bundles in his verandah. Just then a bearer of the palm-leaf letter arrives.]

Alva : Oh, You are Bommaya from Bola, aren't you? Come, come. Sit. What brings you here?

Bommaya : The lords have sent you a letter, sir. [Gives it.]

Alva : Is it so? What's the matter?... Listen, O Saamo! Bommaya of Bola has come. Give him some drink to slake his thirst.

[Bommaya goes there. Kotpar Alva opens the letter and reads.]

Greetings from Boliya Desinge and Kariya Kasinge of Bola Mallige Palace to our dear Kotpar Alva from Kotradi. Our friendship has been like that of milk and water. We are like children born of the same mother. We do not know the reason why you have stayed away from Bola Manor in this

manner. Is there anything that has caused you pain and upset you? We are so bored without having you here to play dice, *Cenne*, and chess with. We request you to come here the day after tomorrow to decide about the three-day annual *Keddasa* hunting spree in February.

Regards

Boliya Desinge, Karia Kasinge.

[Ponders] I get no time to get away from the agricultural work I am immersed in at the manor here. Poor things! I wonder how hurt the lords of Bola must have felt. It would be wrong if I did not go even after receiving their letter. I shall go there quickly and return. [Gets ready.]

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Scene Twenty

[The manor at Bola Mallige. The Bola lords have welcomed Kotpar Alva with respect and the latter is seated in the open hall. They keep the tray of betel leaves and nuts in front of him.]

Desinge : O Kotpar Alva, you have turned out to be as rare as the flower of the country-fig tree.

Kotpar Alva : Earlier, whenever I put a betel nut into my mouth at Kotradi, you would be applying slake-lime to the leaf here at Bola.

Kasinge : Earlier, if you did not see us for four days, your eyes would search around for us. But it looks like you have forgotten us now!

Kotpar Alva : *Che! Che!* How can I forget you? It's just that I couldn't find time to come. Nothing else. It won't happen in future!

Desinge : [smiling] It's good that you accept it now! The town has lost its charm without you. Do you know how long it has been since we played *Cenne* and chess? Let's talk about the hunting game of *Keddasa* season. Now let's first play a round of dice. Kasinga, go and get the board for dice, and the cowries. I will have a drink brought to quench thirst.

[Goes in to where Siri is.] Siri, a guest has come to our house today, Dear. Get him something to drink.

Siri : [A little curious] *Anna*, who is this guest?

Desinge : He is our dearest friend Kotpar Alva from Kotradi. He used to come here every now and then... bring something to drink.

Siri : He is a stranger whom I have never known. How can I come out before him?

Desinge : Don't be shy. Kotpar Alva is very close to us...

[The game has begun. Siri gets milk and bananas.]

Kasinge : Oh, you have brought milk, have you, Siri? Serve it to Alva.

[Siri gives him a small goblet with a spout. Kotpar Alva sees her with astonishment. Siri goes in.]

Desinge : [Seeing that Alva is amazed] What is it Alva? What's the matter?

Alva : [Hiding his surprise] Ha, it's nothing. Just felt my head reel a bit. The betel nut must be intoxicating, I suppose!

[The two lords laugh.]

Desinge : Nothing is likely to happen. Have the milk and bananas.

[Alva drinks the milk and eats the bananas. His eyes are searching for Siri.]

Kasinge : Now that you feel relaxed let us resume the game.

Alva : Let us play… I have to ask something. You must not feel offended.

Desinge : *Che! Che!* Go on, be happy, and ask away.

Alva : You have been so close to me. And yet you have kept such an important thing secret!

Kasinge : [Pretending to be surprised] What is that, Alva?

Alva : You ask as if you know nothing! Does the girl who brought the milk belong to the manor? Or did she come from outside? Perhaps she has descended to earth from the Ethereal world?

Desinge : [smiling] Oh, are you referring to her? She is our dear sister.

Alva : Sister, did you say? There! What did I say? This is what you concealed from me. How is it I never knew you had a sister?

Kasinge : How would you know? We were blessed to have her only recently.

Alva : How's that? I cannot understand any of this!

Desinge : She is Siri of Satyanapura. Biruma Alva of Satyanapura received her from *Bermer* as a divine offering. She got married to Kanthu Punja of Basrur manor and has

had to bathe in a sea of tears thereafter. By divorcing an immoral husband who was unjust to her, and by walking away with courage, she has upheld the eminence of womankind. We were fortunate to have a vision of her because of divine will. We then considered her our sister and brought her here to this manor.

Alva : This is a marvellous thing indeed! She is not only the Siri of Satyaloka, but of the world of powerful deities. Don't get me wrong, but what is her plan for the future?

Desinge : We have left that decision to Siri herself. Be that as it may, but do you have some opinion on the matter?

Alva : How can I desist from telling you? As soon as I set eyes on Siri, a desire has been welling up in me. If you permit me to, and if Siri wills it, I am ready to marry her. Such a lovely jasmine must not wilt away and drop just so.

Kasinge : If you wish to marry her you have our consent. Isn't that so, *Anna*? It would take our friendship further and be a bridge to forge a new relationship.

Alva : You know that I am a married man.

Desinge : It is nothing new for the landlords of manors to marry twice or thrice.

Kasinga : Isn't this a second marriage for our Siri too?

Desinge : That's true enough. We anyway wanted to give Siri to you in marriage. Where

else could we find such a suitable and endowed landlord? Siri has the good fortune of always living in a manor!

Alva : If I have your approval, I trust I will have Siri's as well.

Desinge : Our heart says that Siri will agree. You sit here awhile. We will ask our sister for her consent, and come back.

[They go in.]

Desinge : [Going close to Siri] Siri, you have seen the guest who visited us, haven't you?

Siri : I did not turn in his direction to see. I kept the milk and came in.

Kasinge : In that case, come once again, and have a good look at him.

Siri : Are you joking, *Anna*? Why should I see him?

Desinge : It's not a joke, Dear. We were thinking of finding a befitting man, blessed in all ways, to whom we could get you married again. Kotpar Alva is a good man. He is the lord of Kotradi manor. He is good-looking too. After he saw you, it's clear there's a desire sprouting within him too. If this is not divine will, then what is? ... But for anything to happen, we need your consent, Dear.

Siri : What should I say? I have no wish to cook for yet another husband. I live here in peace and comfort.

Kasinge : For how long would it be good for you to remain thus, Siri? It is our desire that your life be filled to the brim with riches.

Siri : I know well that my brothers wish well

for me. I will not object to your will.

Desinge : In that case, come out once more, and have a good look at Alva.

Siri : No need, *Anna*. I am satisfied. Besides, his features have conjured up before my eyes.

Kasinge : Ah! Say so! So you do consent, don't you?

Siri : If you approve, so do I.

Desinge : Haven't we already said that we approve? It is also our wish that in future, those women in Tulunadu who are struggling under hardships and injustice should have such emancipation.

Siri : It's all the will of *Berme*!

[The brothers return happily.]

Dessinge : Alva, Siri has gladly given her consent. We give you our word today with a pat of our hand. [Both of them thump Ava's hand and give him their word. Alva's face shows his happiness.]

Let us make preparations for the marriage as soon as possible. Let us exchange betel leaves!

[They exchange betel leaves.]

Alva : Right, then. I will return with the marriage-procession in eight days' time.

Desinge : Good. It's a very happy day in our life today.

[Celebration for all.]

Alva : Fine. I shall leave now.

Kasinge : What's the hurry? Since you are here anyway, why not finish a game of dice?

Alva : Alright, I have no objection!

[The game continues.]

Paddana

In three days' time Kotpar Alva of Kotradi becomes a bridegroom and travels down to Bola Mallige, all decked up… The Bola Mallige Kshatriyas receive him at the marriage ceremony with great honour. Siri is married off to Kotpar Alva and the bride is handed over to him… The marriage procession descends and departs… Aa… Aa…Aa… Narayana, Narayana.

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Gondolu

Characters

- Sutradhar Stage manager/narrator
- Female actor
- Pergade Gurkar/landlord of Kana manor
- Jaru and Thukra Pergade's attenders
- Kanthu Pergade's tenant
- Debe Kanthu's wife
- Thaniya Kanthu's friend
- Dancers, *Gondolu*-worshippers, hunters

Scene One

[Scene of *Gondolu* worship in the middle of the stage. The devotees hold small flaming torches and begin dancing slowly at first and then go round faster and faster.]

***Gondolu* song**

Denna denna dennana
Denna denna dennana
Hail O hail
Denna denna dennana
All hail to Swami bhoomi
Denna denna dennana
Hail O Naga Berma
Denna denna dennana
Hail Mammaayi Mother Goddess
Denna denna dennana
Hail O Jumadi
Denna denna dennana
Hail O Maastiamma
Denna denna dennana
Greetings to the old and the young
Denna denna dennana
All hail to the Mother guarding our village
Denna denna dennana
Periodic worship to Gondolu
Denna denna dennana
Kanthu of the low dry field
Denna denna dennana
She was completely his

Denna denna dennana
Beautiful woman Debe
Denna denna dennana
Evil gaze of Kana tiger
Denna denna dennana
Gored by the tawny cow's horns
Denna denna dennana
Keddasa hunting expedition
Denna denna dennana
The boar has fallen
Denna denna dennana
The curved knife on the charging fighter-cock
Denna denna dennana
Two lives are taken
Denna denna dennana
Gathered into the fold of Jumadi
Denna denna dennana
Debe reaches there
Denna denna dennana
The chaste wife as Maasthiamma
Denna denna dennana
Hail all hail
Denna denna dennana

[The *Gondolu* devotees leave the stage. The sutradhar and the female actor return.]

Sutradhar : We offer a heartfelt greeting to the large assembly here. [Greets them.] We must tell the people gathered here about the play to be performed today, mustn't we?

Actor : Yes, yes, sir, we must tell them! So many people are waiting so eagerly to watch the play. So they must know what this performance means.

Sutradhar : There's nothing new about the play we are showing today.

Actor : Then is it an old story? But then who wants to see your old *Bhootalapandya* kind of story being enacted?

Sutradhar : Hang on, hang on. Don't dismiss the play as trivial and say it is an old tale. Though old, it is still novel.

Actor : How's that?

Sutradhar : Come to think of it, what then in this world is new, and what old? Who is young, and who is old? A new spring can gush forth in an old well, new tendrils shoot up round an old tree-stump, and a new lamp can brighten an old shrine.

Actor : I do not criticise your poetry. Let that be. But what is the play all about?

Sutradhar : It has been decided that today we will show the story of Debe.

Actor : Debe? Who is that? Is that a woman or a man? *Daiva* or *bhuta*?

Sutradhar : In courage, manly, and in beauty, feminine. In morals, a goddess, and in glory, a *Daiva*.

Actor : Just fold up your roundabout talk and your twisted words. Now tell me who Debe is.

Sutradhar : Debe is a poor girl with high moral principles and integrity of character. She is a lovely golden doll, and a chaste wife.

Actor : Then this is certainly not a story filled with dance and laughter, is it?

Sutradhar : Yes, it is true we need dance and laughter. But can we be laughing all the hours of the day? The muck and filth of the body needs

to be washed clean sometimes with a stream of tears too.

Actor : Yes. As the body loves sweet things, the bitter too should be swallowed.

Sutradhar : True. A literary work will give aesthetic pleasure if a variety of sentiments are aroused in a story.

Actor : Then is this a tale of love?

Sutradhar : Now without that how would the world enact its play? It is the primal life principle that makes all creatures run around and dance, and all heads must bow before this. Lust, love, desire, covetousness – call it by any name. The core is common to all. Who has the strength to escape being sucked into the vortex of women, land, money, and name? Neither human beings nor gods can escape it. Besides, who can equal Kamadeva, the king of love crowing in triumph as he makes all creatures get madly infatuated and then plunges them into a whirlpool? One cannot ever exhaust our talk about his divine glory.

Actor : The manner in which you have crowned Kamadeva does not satisfy me.

Sutradhar : Here, listen to me. Give up this deceitful talk. Just listen to one thing that is essential. The entire world suffers because of the skill with which Kamadeva pierces our entrails with love... Have you understood? [Holds her hand.]

Actor : *Chi! Chi!* Let go of my hand! There are great men, women, and children seated here. Don't expose your character to them! You

ought to first ascertain where you are, and in whose company. Do understand that there is a time and place for everything!

Sutradhar : That's exactly what I am saying. I haven't completed what I had to say about the power of love. But you began to behave like a self-righteous woman! Never mind... No matter what it is that drives human beings, if they cross their limit, forget their station, and play the game of love, then it is certain that their game will turn topsy-turvy. Like parched rice in a hot pan they will burn in the throes of love.

Actor : *Abba*! The God of desire is the main cause of everything!!

Sutradhar : Love that stays within limits is like the fragrance of musk. If it transgresses limits then there is a sickle ready to endanger our life. If we do not use the axle-pin of moral restraint on the cart of love, how far can you travel? I held your hand just to demonstrate this. That's all.

Actor : Oh! Is that so? I presumed it was something else.

Sutradhar : Is that my fault? Don't I know how things have to be shown on stage? Never mind. Look over there. That is Jumadi's shrine, and what you see on the other side is the shrine of Mammaayi... By its side is the shrine of Debe.

Actor : Debe's shrine? But isn't that supposed to be the shrine of Maasthiamma?

Sutradhar : True. And the original name of this Maasthiamma is Debe. It is this very Debe

who, as Goddess, now protects our village.

Actor : What kind of dance was it that took place just now in front of the shrine?

Sutradhar : That? It is called *Gondolu* worship.

Actor : *Gondolu* worship, is it? What is the connection between this worship and the play to be performed today?

Sutradhar : You will understand that after you have seen the entire play. If I were to tell you everything right away it would be like building steps to a house that are far bigger than the house itself! … Let us make arrangements for the play to begin.

Actor : Alright. Let's go.

[They leave.]

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Scene Two

Song

The great gurkar of the manor
Is a man of great pride and superior air
Hot blooded man of immense pomp
With upturned moustache displays his prowess
In sports, buffalo-race, hunting, and warfare
None can equal him in status and fortune
He is grandiloquence incarnate
Strutting around in grand array
Rivalled by none in coveting comely women
Married elsewhere
And in eager promotion of luxurious plenitude

[When the song ends the landlord of Kana manor comes on stage haughtily. He has two attenders with him. The troupe of artistes go to the side of the stage. The *gurkar* occupies his seat.]

Pergade : What's the news around the village, man?

Jaru : Nothing much, sir. Just that people are talking in places about what happened yesterday. But not to our face. Just behind our backs.

Pergade : Are they rebuking us?

Thukra : Is there anyone who would dare admonish us and still survive here after that? Only someone close to death who would do that!

Pergade : Is there anyone who dare raise the sickle to confront us?

Jaru : Won't he perish? Can the toad compete with the bull?

Pergade : Say that! Look, man, what do you say about our feat yesterday?

Thukra : He hadn't paid up the lease amount, and was sitting tight, chest all puffed up, right? Didn't I then see his courage yesterday?

Pergade : I told myself, 'Poor fellow! Forget it. Let him go.' But this chap is secretly ganging up with our enemies and plotting against me! Therefore his wings had to be clipped. I cut all his crop and lugged it here.

Jaru : That was the kind of action that needed to be taken. Otherwise these insolent tenants will sit on our heads. I believe he packed his rice pots and vessels right away last night and left the village with his wife and children.

Pergade : Let him go. Look here, man, I feel thirsty. Why hasn't our toddy reached yet?

Jaru : Kanthu should have come by now, as he usually does.

Pergade : Who is that? Walking along the bund of the buffalo-race field?

Thukra : Some woman. She has a pot, frothing white, on her head.

Jaru : She must be Kanthu's wife.

Pergade : Ah, the girl who got married the other day? Good. I too haven't seen the new bride who has come to the village.

Thukra : Can anyone come to this place and depart without coming to the door step of the manor house?

Pergade : That they have to, anyway. Did you see her, man? What a woman!

Jaru : Yes, she is indeed some woman! A strong-willed woman.

Pergude : Looks like a young fawn.

Thukra : Yes, sir, looks just like a fawn.

Pergade : Isn't she approaching like a young cobra, spreading her hood?

Jaru : Yes, oh yes, sir. Exactly a little cobra. Looks so yellow.

Pergade : Looks like a piece of turmeric, doesn't she?

Thukra : Smooth enough for a finger-ring to slip in and out.

Pergade : Have you ever set eyes on such a beautiful woman anywhere in this village?

Jaru : I haven't ever, sir.

Thukra : Nor have I, sir.

Pergade : One must be blessed to set eyes on her. But what is to be done? What peace and prosperity can she experience after marrying that crude calf Kantha?

Jaru : That uncouth fellow is a lowly calf worth just the water collected after washing rice.

[Debe comes slowly up and stops. She sees Pergade and looks a little afraid.]

Pergade : Why do you stand there? Come, come. You are our Kanthu's wife, aren't you?

Debe : Yes, sir.

Pergade : What's your name?

Debe : Debe.

Pergade : Debe, is it? Good. Keep the pot down on the verandah. Don't be shy.

[Debe keeps the pot on the verandah.]

Pergade: Pour out the toddy into the tumbler.

[She pours it.]

Pergade : You have poured it out anyway. Serve it with your own hands.

[She pours the toddy into the tumbler. He drinks.]

Pergade : Now this is what you call real toddy. It is exactly the ambrosia of the celestial world. From the crown-shaft of which palm-tree is this toddy got? Such wonderful, sweet toddy?

Debe : It is the usual palm we bring from.

Pergade : It was never this sweet till now. Ah! How sweet! How sweet! The fragrance seems to kiss my nose.

Jaru : It is because the pot is new, sir.

Pergade : Now that too is true. My body feels exhilarated with just two swigs. By the way, pour out some for yourselves as well.

Thukra : After you are done, sir.

Debe : I shall leave, sir.

Pergade : Wait, Girl. You are a new bride. Should you come to our doorstep and leave empty-

handed? Look, Jaru, give her four measures of paddy along with two coconuts, and send her.

Jaru : Alright, sir. [Goes in.]

Pergade : Here, will you chew a betel leaf?

[Debe is silent. The *gurkar* takes the betel leaf and nut from the plate and hands it to her. Debe stands hesitantly, takes the pot, and sets off.]

Pergade : By the way, let Kanthu come here a while. I have some work with him.

[She leaves. Pergade gazes in her direction.] Can a woman be so beautiful? *Che*! Which world is she from? If you tap her with a finger, it seems like blood will spout forth! She is so young and lovely.

Jaru : Lovely child. Perfectly beautiful cat.

Pergade : She is no ordinary cat, rather, a fragrant civet cat.

Jaru : That's exactly what I said.

Pergade : In a way it is not nice to praise the beauty of a girl from our village, is it?

Thukra : What's wrong, sir, in saying things as they are?

Pergade : That too is true. Now here's this colourful hen that has come to our courtyard, though we never dreamt of it.

Jaru : Now you must wait for an opportune moment and crow to her.

Pergade : Leave that to me. Go on, drink the toddy, and don't be shy. [They drink. There is darkness on the stage.]

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Scene Three

[Kanthu meets Thaniya on the way.]

Thaniya : Oh, it is Kanthu, right? What, *maraya*? Not to be seen after your marriage? You have become as rare as the flower of the country-fig tree?

Kanthu : I had some work to attend to at home, Thaniyanna. So I couldn't come.

Thaniya : Yes, yes. Say that you haven't the heart, even for a minute, to leave the bride who's just come home. Admit it.

Kanthu : Hee hee hee.

Thaniya : That's not your fault. You are indeed fortunate to have got a veritable goddess for a bride.

Kanthu : And are you any less fortunate?

Thaniya : Let my luck be cast off as withered paddy-stalks to the cows! My plight is that of adding pungent hog-plums to a dish of wild colocasia leaves. Forget my woes. At least let some other chap have a beautiful life. We are not spiteful and malicious. Where are you headed, Kanthu?

Kanthu : I have to go to the landlord's house.

Thaniya : Is that so? By the way, our Badu from Barabail - poor fellow! Left without a place to sit. He tied up his things and left, didn't he?

Kanthu : If you do not give the landlord's share of the produce for three to four years, who will tolerate that?

Thaniya : But Kanthu, where is he to get such a large share of the crop? Shouldn't there be some

limit even to the landlord's share? We slave in the muck and mud of the fields, and slog and sweat for three hundred and sixty days. Thereafter we have to place all our produce at the feet of the landlord. Then what should we eat? Mud?

Kanthu : That's true. But the landlord's coffers shouldn't have to deplete. If not forty *seers* of rice, at least give ten *seers* to him, right?

Thaniya : True. No one must swallow up what we owe to someone else. But we all know that poor Badu's plight. Misfortune, illness, and death never seem to end in his house. What can he do on his own?

Kanthu : Even my heart burns when I think of Badu's plight. But he must somehow pay the landlord's share, shouldn't he?

Thaniya : Repaying is fine! But we must first examine the tree before chipping its bark off, shouldn't we? If there's no bark to chip off in the first place? Any heart would melt if you heard Badu's wife sitting in the yard and lamenting aloud as she did the other day. That *gurkar's* gang of miscreants threw out his pots from the kitchen onto the doorstep. Is there anyone whose heart wouldn't burn on seeing this? Does that *gurkar* have any compassion, any trace of blood in his eyes?

Kanthu : True, Thaniyanna. But who do you reveal your heart-burn to? If an earthworm wants to flare its hood like the cobra, how much could it protract? What's to be achieved from a poor man's wrath? Can we dash our head against a boulder because our head

is strong? If we fall down headlong what would happen? We need to humour the rich and survive.

Thaniya : I have no idea about this humour and fun. I will tell you something, Kanthu. Be a little careful about that *gurkar* of Kana manor. Don't think that all that shines is silver!

Kanthu : I am always careful, Thaniyanna. I shall leave now.

Thaniya : Fine. I too shall have a look at the market-fair and return.

[They leave.]

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Scene Four

[Pergade is sitting on the cot in the courtyard. The servants are sitting on the ground.]

Pergade : You have built a strong dike to the stream, haven't you?

Jaru : Yes, sir.

Pergade : Use the water for our fields and groves, and let the remaining water flow down. Let the fields of those living in the lower regions too have the benefit of the water!... We must not withhold the water that God has given…

Thukra : What you say is right, sir.

Pergade : Who's that coming along? Kanthu, isn't he?

Thukra : Yes, sir.

[Kanthu comes and prostrates before the *gurkar*.]

Kanthu : My salutations, sir.

Pergade : Ha! You have come? Good. Had a grand wedding?

Kanthu : On a small scale…

Pergade : A girl that befits you! She's called Debe? Fine. It's good. Live happily! Ah, by the way, the reason why I sent for you,…

Kanthu : I do not know, sir.

Pergade : I am a person who thinks that his tenants and underlings should live in comfort and happiness. But if anyone challenges me then I am a man who will knock their skull off!

Kanthu : Yes, sir.

Jaru : He will let the good even walk all over his chest!

Thukra : But he will squeeze the brains of those who antagonise him!

Pergade : Yeah! Do you know that Badu, our tenant at Barebail left the village and fled the day before yesterday?

Kanthu : I know, sir.

Pergade : He came to try his cunning tricks on me. I watched quietly for three years! Let's set aside the matter of my share of his agricultural produce! How many times have I not excused those who came with crestfallen faces and said, "Nothing has grown well and ripened this time, sir"? But this fellow was going around with my enemies behind my back! So I rid myself of his inauspicious presence!

Kanthu : His bad luck! One should be destined to lead a good life!

Pergade : Barebail is adjacent to where you live, isn't it? You look after it henceforth. What do you say?

Kanthu : What can I say? Master is very generous. As of now, I have just enough land of the span of a hand. If master would give Barebail on lease, it will be good.

Pergade : Why do you want to talk about lease and stuff now? You take care of the land at Barebail. It is just like owning a golden plate to dine off. This land is very profitable. Go, cultivate it and eat off it. We can speak of other things later.

Kanthu : Alright, sir.

Pergade : How's the toddy-tapping going on?

Kanthu : We are carrying on, sir. The path leading up to the coconut tree-toddy is a little far off, and rather hard. Now the oozing of toddy too has slowed down.

Pergade : But don't mix water into it because you get less of it now!

Kanthu : *Aiyyayyo*! That's one skill I know nothing of, sir.

Pergade : Alright. Leave now. By the way, the money you borrowed for your marriage.... Don't return it.

[Kanthu falls at Pergade's feet.]

Kanthu : Sir, you are just like God. How can I repay your debt?

Pergade : I shall tell you all of that some day. Go now. If human beings do not help each other, how is the world to run?

Kanthu : That's true, sir. I shall leave then...

Pergade : Look here, Kanthu. How many cocks have

you got ready for the cock-fighting at the Polali temple festival?

Kanthu : Cocks, sir? *Maipe* breed of mixed colours, *uriye* with red and yellow feathers, the hawk-like *Gidiye,* and the tufted *panjoni* – these are the four breeds I had got ready for the fight. But the night before last, a pack of foxes descended on them and attacked the fowl. I was heart-broken that night. I was miserable. How splendid the cocks were!

Pergade : Then don't you have a brood of fowl now? How many of the cocks with blades tied to their legs came back in one piece last year?

Kanthu : Only a brooding hen is left!

Pergade : Then get a cock. That should suffice for your hen, to win the whole village, so to say. Hey Thukra, give that black and white cock to Kanthu.

Thukra : But that has gone with the cock-fight held the other day at Kayer Majal manor.

Pergade : In that case give him the hen-faced cock.

Thukra : Alright.

Thukra and Kanthu leave.]

Pergade : How's that? That chap is a useless cock with a sickle feather. I just daubed a little jaggery on the elbow of this dirty fellow to lure him. Will our plan bear fruit?

Jaru : Can anything you cast your eyes on escape your grasping hand, sir?

Pergade : Then why should this monkey-face have this golden girl? A fine ruby should only be set in gold, shouldn't it? Now let it be, but remember, the buffalo-race in the large field

near my manor should take place on a grand scale this year.

Jaru : Yes, sir. This time you must try your hand at the race. It's been years since you tied a race-plank to the yoke. Everyone's saying they want to see the fantastic way in which you splash the water so high.

Pergade : Is that so? [Touches his moustache.] In that case, I shall certainly enter the race-field!

Thukra : [Coming] When master enters, it will be evident from the way he splashes water high on the pole-mark.

Pergade : If not, then why simply enter the race-field, man? To bathe in the muck and the muddy water? It is only after winning that you should climb the raised bank at the reaching point of the field.

Jaru : Yes, sir. Can we ever allow our moustache to droop?

Pergade : The *Gondolu* worship, buffalo-race, cock-fight, and *Kola* must take place with much greater pomp this time round. The hospitality during meals, the fire-crackers and country-bombs, and the cock-fight should be on a grand scale. Tell all the tenants and workers to give as much as they can, and go and collect banana leaves, tender coconuts, coconuts, fowl, and items for curries from them. All who come must eat well and leave. This time, the *Gondolu*, the deity-impersonation *Kola*, and the buffalo-race must be so splendid that nothing in the future should hold a candle to it. Am I right, Jaru?

Jaru : Absolutely, sir.
Pergade : In that case, go and collect all the items.
Both : Alright, sir.
[Both of them leave.]

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Scene Four

[Kanthu's house. Debe is sweeping. Kanthu comes carrying a cock.]

Kanthu : Here, Debe. Tie this cock up and feed it some paddy and water.
Debe : Where is this cock from?
Kanthu : The landlord gave it.
Debe : Is it? This is indeed a very surprising thing! The tradition everywhere is for the tenant to offer a cock or vegetables before harvesting, to the landlord. Here, our landlord has given the cock to us instead. Our landlord is a very large-hearted man!
Kanthu : Forget about the cock. The landlord says he has given to us the adjacent land of Barebail. He didn't even speak about the lease. He told me to remain here.
Debe : He even gave the land to you? I do not know what to say about our landlord's kindness. But why did such a good man evict poor Badu *Anna* from his tenancy?
Kanthu : Debe, don't we get land and water only where we are destined to? Is it the property

of the tenant's father that he can stay on without paying the landlord's share, and eat up all the produce of the harvest? No matter what hardship you face, shouldn't we give at least the flower petal, if not the flower? If we don't give even this much, then which landlord would leave it at that?

Debe : That's true. Our landlord is not unjust. When you listen to him it is clear he is someone who has ethics and knows norms of morality. How well he spoke to me when I went there to deliver the daily supply of toddy the day before yesterday! On top of that he sent me away with coconuts and paddy.

Kanthu : Most landlords have a sweet tongue, but when it comes to giving, a twisted hand. But our landlord has a huge mouth and a large hand too. Or else would he give me this land, as profitable as a golden plate? Anyway, it is all by the entry of the auspicious feet of the girl whose hand I held in marriage.

Debe : I have no idea if it is auspicious feet or hands. It's enough if God manages everything just the way he's done till now.

Kanthu : Do you know something Thaniyanna told me today?

Debe : What?

Kanthu : That I am the lucky man who had the good fortune of marrying a beautiful girl who is auspicious like *Bhagyalakshmi*.

Debe : Go! You are teasing me! Don't simply make up things.

Kanthu : Why? Aren't his words true?

Debe : If it's true then keep seeing the beautiful face

of the wife, and just sit quietly at home! The stomach will be filled! Don't go out to tap toddy.

Kanthu : I too know that admiring my wife's beauty will not fill our stomachs. But, Debe, won't the mind be full? What's wrong if I see my beautiful wife, praise her, and pat my own back? Not in the presence of others, of course. Just between the two of us?

Debe : In that case, sit here and keep seeing my face. What's my problem?

Kanthu : Debe, if only I knew to create and sing *paddana* songs I would sit, singing them enchantingly. But I do not know to sing. But this much I can say: No matter how much my body might suffer thirst, sorrow, fatigue, and hunger, if I only see your face once, then that's enough! I could brush everything aside and climb a mountain! Even when I am atop the coconut tree I remember only you; my eyes are still rivetted in your direction. I come running, wondering when I will get to see this face just once!

Debe : Don't you feel ashamed to say all this?

Kanthu : Why feel ashamed to say things as they are. Debe?

Debe : Now that too is true! How would you know how bored I feel sitting here all alone the entire day like a block of wood, when you are gone? When I see you come from afar my boredom flees and joy wells up within me.

Kanthu : Don't I understand that?

Debe : By the way, you had told me yesterday to

make rice-dough and jaggery pudding on embers, hadn't you? Shall I get it for you? I do not know how it is cooked. I wonder how it has turned out.

Kanthu : Enough of your coyness, Debe. Who says you do not know? My mouth waters even now when I think of the pudding you made the day before yesterday. Ah! The flat rice pancakes you made the other day!

Debe : Your jokes, I say…

Kanthu : Where is the pudding made on coal? Get it. I am so hungry my stomach is on fire. Forget live-coal pudding. If you give me the embers from the hearth, I am hungry enough to wolf that down too. Let's see.

[Debe goes in.]

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Scene Six

[Thukra and Jaru set out to collect dues. They come to Thaniya's door-step. Thaniya is tying a rope to one handle of a basket and is singing *paddanas*.]

Thukra : Who's that? O Thaniya, what are you doing?

Thaniya : Who? Is that Thukranna? Are you here too, Jaruanna? What's the matter?

Jaru : Nothing. We came to tell you we will have the *Gondolu* worship, buffalo-race, cock-fight, and *Kola* of our Kana manor next Saturday at the time of the full moon.

Thaniya : Alright. I know it.

Thukra : It's not enough if you know it. It's not the same as last year. Our landlord has decided to have a very grand *Gondolu* and *Kola* this year.

Thaniya : Alright. That's good.

Jaru : It's fine to say that's good. You made us dance around chasing you last year. Never gave either tender coconuts or a cock!

Thaniya : Who says so? I took it to the pandal and deposited it there.

Thukra : Look here, man, don't blurt out empty lies! Whenever we show some leniency you don't even fear the landlord. Nor are you afraid of the deity!

Thaniya : *Che, che*! What are you saying? I swear by my neck! If we cheat the deities, won't our eyes blast? We can deceive human beings, but can we deceive and bind the eyes of the divine?

Jaru : Forget that. The landlord has instructed us to collect the contribution from everyone this time round, without sparing any house.

Thaniya : I am poor. In this situation, how am I to give so much all at once? From what little I have, I shall give a petal if not the whole flower.

Jaru : All that won't work. Go, earn from some place, and give it. Shouldn't the rituals and ceremonies of the deities take place with pomp and show? Don't we have to serve the feast-meals to all?

Thaniya : Yes. But the whole world knows the kind of crop we have had. Forget the rice bundle. Even the rope to tie the bundle with is gone.

We will just have to scoop out the loose paddy seeds kept for sowing. Now you come along and see the coconut spathes atop my trees. Forget the coconuts and the tender coconuts, even the tiny buds have fallen off.

Thukra : If you deceive the deities, can you escape their ire for three monsoons? Don't tell us all your fictitious woes. If you don't have it, then steal from somewhere. But you will have to make your contribution.

Thaniya : *Chi*! Steal! What are you saying? I wasn't born to such a father that I would rob! Should one have to rob and pay their contribution?

Thukra : If you don't cough up your contribution, how is the *Kola* to be performed? Your time of destruction has arrived, hasn't it? You are bristling and crowing like a cock! If we show you leniency, you clamber up our head, don't you?

Jaru : How would you like us to flay the skin off your back? Don't you have anything at all? Let us enter the house and see.

Thaniya : Don't you dare step in!

Jaru : [Pushing Thaniya aside] Go, man! Just who are you? A mosquito guarding against an angry cobra! You will obstruct us, will you? [They enter the house and seize a round bundle of rice and four coconuts knotted together. They come out and untie the cock that is outside.]

Jaru : There's nothing, he says! Rogue!

Thaniya : Thukranna, please spare me, *maaraya*! I will give you the rice-contribution. If you take away the only tiny bundle of rice we have

left, should we die of starvation?

Thukra : Do whatever you want to. We couldn't care less!

Thaniya : Jaru *Anna*, do give me that cock, *Anna*. He is the victor who stood erect to challenge sixteen cocks at the cock-fight held during the *Kola*. He is my very life!

Jaru : Shut your mouth! We told you decently. But you tried to act clever, and then spoke insolently! Wretched centipede fallen under the *gurkar's* feet and writhing! What impertinence you show!

Thukra : Can a cock used in preparing the curry ever become a fighter-cock? Don't tell us anything more. If you have anything to say, then go to the courtyard of the manor and request the landlord. He alone should revoke it. [They leave.]

Thaniya : [Looking in their direction] You have plundered a poor man in this manner? You have struck at my stomach, haven't you? Will that deity not strike your chest with the divine power of the thunderbolt? Oh! You snatched away the rice meant for us to eat! May your hand not reach your mouth! May a serpent bite your hand! Won't the agony and heart-burn of a poor man char you! You fill ears with your lies and initiate quarrels. When the landlord says a thing, you extort tenfold, and swallow it up! May that deity widen his eyes and see you!

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Scene Seven

[Pergade comes to Kanthu's house. He stands in the courtyard and gives a cough and clears his throat.]

Pergade : Who is there within?

Debe : [Comes out.] Oh! Salutations to the master. Has the landlord come to the house of the poor?

Pergade : Poor and rich! All that is absurd. What does it matter if a house is a hut or a manor? Only those who are large-hearted are great!

Debe : [Putting a straw mat on the verandah] Sit, sir.

Pergade : I felt bored at home. I came to see our dike built at Barebail. Last year the bund caved in and the rubble was scattered around. As I had come here anyway, I thought of the two of you. I decided to visit you.

Debe : It's good that you came, sir. But I have no idea how I must behave with the master. There's nothing in this hut of the poor. If he were here he would at least pluck a tender coconut. Ha! There's milk to drink. Shall I get it?

Pergade : I shall drink the milk! Don't let me disturb and hustle you. I don't require any great honour and reception. What's better than speaking a few nice words? Ha! If you have it, then let me eat some betel leaf and nut!

[Debe brings the small basket of betel leaves and nuts. Pergade smears the lime on the betel leaf.]

Pergade : I presume Kanthu will take a while to come?

Debe : Yes, sir.

Pergade : I usually drink toddy at the manor. I felt like

drinking it here today.

Debe : Alright, sir.

Pergade : Did you come the other day to see the buffalo-race?

Debe : Yes, sir. How you drove the racing-buffalo! *Abbaba*! Everyone was amazed.

Pergade : That's nothing! During a ritual celebration, I was the man who splashed water to the height of seven yards on the measuring-pole at the buffalo race held in the large field beside the manor!

Debe : I have never seen such an intense race till now, sir.

Pergade : You have no idea. It has been a while since I got into the race-field. I am the one who held the horns of all kinds of overgrown, uncontrollable buffaloes - glaring and pushing around – and stopped them in their tracks. Let that be. [Stretches out a hand to give a sari from under his armpit to Debe.] Here, take this. It's my gift to mark the occasion of the buffalo-race!

Debe : What is this, sir?

Pergade : It's a sari, Debe. A beautiful woman like you shouldn't be wearing such faded, black rags! You must wear better saris than that!

Debe : Such things are not for the poor, sir.

Pergade : There! Don't say such things. A woman like you, endowed with the wealth of beauty! How can you be poor? It's my desire that you eat, dress and drape well, and strut around. If you need anything ask me without any hesitation.

Debe : The two of us will slog, sweat, eat, and dress.

That's enough for us. Happiness lies in just this, sir. I do not want to stretch out for gifts I have not worked for.

Pergade : Do you know what my mind tells me?

Debe : What?

Pergade : It's a case of letting a jasmine creeper entwine itself around a thicket of prickly pear…

Debe : What jasmine creeper?

Pergade : Do I have to specify? They got the civet cat married to a squirrel! While dealing with gold, shouldn't colour and weight be considered?

Debe : I cannot comprehend your words, sir.

Pergade : Look here, Debe, do not close your eyes and imagine it's dark.

Debe : Sir, I had thought of you as the father of this village – someone who is aware of norms of morality and propriety, and who safeguards the honour of the village. When you speak thus to someone like me who does not know anything, what should I say?

Pergade : Don't say anything. Come here…

Song

O lovely multi-coloured little fawn
I have made room for you in my heart
O dazzling dearest damsel
May love's vine spring up in your heart!
Say that I am the source of joy in your being
My love rolls on like the sea waves at high tide.
How did you obtain such a lovely form, O woman!
My eyes keep veering to your side!
O scented flower of the screwpine trees
The black bee pursues thy sweet fragrance

Those eyes are as lovely as lustrous rubies
And ah! Those ensnaring erotic forelocks that dance!
With pearl-like luscious scarlet-ixora lips
In felicitous union are you enthroned in my bosom
Be thou an entwining amulet round my throbbing arms
While I become your eager binding-cord.

Debe, did you understand what I said? Don't play the coquette with me and pretend not to know what I say. I stretch my hand out to you in great love and ask you. Likewise, you too must show a generous heart.

Debe:

Song

Ayyaiyyo, why do you push me
Into the eddying river current of delusion?
For pleasures of the body why do you slay
A chaste woman in this manner?
Do not plunder thus a married woman
I do have a husband, remember!
I seek not the comforts got by wrong means
Why hurl me down the chasm?

Pergade : Debe, don't be so angry.

Song

Don't get angry O lovely lass
I am the fragrant oil in your lustrous lamp
Forever do my thoughts dwell on you
You are the very breath of my being till my last breath
So recite not tales of morality
Whoever rejects sweet porridge when offered?
Why fear the entanglements of desire?
Everything here is by divine grace
Besotted I was the day I saw you
And with each passing day

How I keep pining for you!
'O my beloved!' Call me thus and do come
I offer you the lush fruit of love.

Debe : Is it right for you to come to my house when my husband is not around and wrong me thus? Don't pollute your mind. Do not slit the throat of a chaste wife. Have pity on me and leave.

Pergade : I came because I do pity you. Look here, woman. You just come here once. I will tell you something.

Debe : Why do you covet the fruit of sin?

Song

Where has this perverse thinking come from?
Do you advance with mad laughter and wild dance?
Did you forget the injustice Ravana once did?
Despite all his knowledge and learning?

Pergade : Ha, ha, ha! You are a woman of great learning! Now you will teach me the Ramayana! Great gods in the Puranas have fallen for women and chased them. So what's new in this story – yours and mine?

Debe : I am not interested in such stories, sir. Do not push me into a bottomless whirlpool.

Pergade : Understand one thing. The entire world sports by the principle of the mutual attraction between man and woman. Do you realise this hidden mystery at least now?

Debe : I shall never deceive the man who held my hand, sir.

Pergade : Let the one who held your hand also be around. He will be of use as a crutch to hold on to for support. As for the flowing stream

of your love, let me be the bridge.

Debe : Sir, do not say such things and be guilty of evil deeds. Don't pile on sins!

Pergade : Look, woman. I am the *gurkar* of the village. Is your acceptance of my love a greater thing than the fact that I have made up my mind to offer you my love? Can't you understand even this? Don't you still know that every beautiful thing in this village, every aspect of life and livelihood here belongs to me?

Debe : I shall not agree to your proposition even if I were to die, sir.

Pergade : Alright, let's see. If you aren't in the right frame of mind now, I am not the kind of man who will behave like a troublemaker, sans good counsel. It's best when a woman comes to you with a smiling face. I am in no hurry. Open up your mind the next time I come.

Debe : *Dammayya,* sir, never come here in future with such desires! If you must come, then get me some poison first. I would rather die than live as a fly caught in an oil-sediment.

Pergade : *Che*! Don't say such things. I will not speak to you now. I shall come some other day.

Debe : Won't you have something to drink?

Pergade : Should I be drinking when I have made you sad? I don't need anything now. I shall leave.

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Scene Eight

[Kanthu comes after completing the toddy-tapping. He keeps aside the scythe, a rope with a hook, and the earthen pot. Debe looks crestfallen.]

Debe : Why are you so late? How long should I sit here like a wooden statue? I feel frightened as well.

Kanthu : In the past you would say you were bored. Now you are frightened too? Then you do a thing, Debe.

Debe : What is that?

Kanthu : You come along with me while I go tapping toddy. Let us wander amidst hills and forests and return.

Debe : What does it matter to you? You are a man. You have no fear. If I express my fears you laugh. There are no neighbours nearby. Owls glare in the forest behind. Sometimes tigers roar in broad daylight!

Kanthu : When you mentioned tigers, I remembered something. I saw a tiger today.

Debe : *Aiyyo*! Where?

Kanthu : Don't we happen to see tigers now and then? But today's was no ordinary tiger. It was a huge one, running across. I was close to the coconut tree spathe. I heard the tiger's roar all at once, and the forest seemed to tremble. When I looked down from the tree-top, it was as if a heap of embers had been scattered. It was chasing a running deer! The deer was gasping and bleating.

Debe : Poor thing! The deer fell prey to the tiger?

Kanthu : The deer was running for dear life. Who

knows what happened thereafter? In any case once the tiger's eyes fall on the prey, it is difficult for the fawn to save itself.

Debe : *Abba*! The very thought makes my limbs tremble. We do not want such toddy-tapping work in forests and hills where there is a risk to life. Let us concentrate our attention on cultivating the Barebail land.

Kanthu : Is it possible to give up the ancestral occupation I have been following all along so suddenly? Won't we invite anger if the contract for the regular supply of toddy is stopped? You have no idea; what can these tigers possibly do to us? If you consider it carefully, the tiger might flee on seeing us!

Debe : I do not know – these days I feel more and more frightened. Sometimes I feel we must leave this land of hills and forests and go to a different place.

Kanthu : Are you also joking? Are you already fed up of this village? After leaving such good land and such a good landlord, where else could we go?

Debe : The land is good, and the landlord is good too…

Kanthu : See, you may feel bored for a short while. If God wills, we will tie a new cradle in our house next year, and your boredom will flee this place. Do you understand?

Debe : You keep joking all the time!

Kanthu : What else should I do? Sit like an owl with a swollen face? Now let that be. What have you cooked today? I feel hungry.

Debe : I have made rice balls along with brinjals.

Kanthu : Is it? Good. I will have a quick bath and come.

Debe : Alright. I shall wash the earthen plate and keep it ready.

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Scene Nine

[Darkness: a sudden shout in the background. "*Aiyyo*! Fire! Fire! Come running! The pile of hay is burning! Fetch water! Douse it! The roof of the cow-shed has caught fire. Come running... lower the roof... Splash water..." Shouts and commotion and running, and sounds of burning... gradually lessens... After a while Pergade and his workers are seen on stage.]

Pergade : What do you say – whose work is this?

Jaru : How can I say who's done it, sir?

Pergade : What is it then? Did the fire start on its own?

Jaru : Perhaps a spark from a flaming torch kept deceitfully might have spread in the sea-breeze.

Pergade : How would the spark from such a distance leap off the torch-fire? Is it by divine power?

Thukra : Perhaps it might have been this way, sir...

Pergade : How, man?

Thukra : There is a tradition of *Guliga* passing across this very place every Tuesday, isn't there? Perhaps a spark from his torch-flame might have flown?

Pergade : You just shut up and sit. Wasn't it just

last month that we cut a hen for *Guliga* and performed a *Kola*? Besides, is *Guliga's* wandering a novelty here? This must be the work of some of our enemies who did it just to settle scores. There's no doubt about that!

Jaru : It looks that way to me too, sir.

Pergade : But none of the things anticipated by those enemies actually happened. There's no damage to the house, granary, or to life and limb, on account of the fire, is there? All the straw must have burnt to ashes! The roof of the cattle-shed must have burnt. That's all, isn't it? Isn't the deity *Jumadi* present on the swing-cot, if the house had to burn? Isn't the Mother-Goddess *Mammaayi* seated on the sacred platform?

Thukre : Isn't that so?

Pergade : Let that be. Now the whoreson who set fire and ran must be caught, mustn't he?

Jaru : If only my eyes had spotted him while he set fire, then I would have caught him, bound him hand and foot, pummelled him, and shoved him into the burning hay! He would get charred, the whoreson of a viper!

Pergade : Forget that. Can we let him go scot-free even now?

Thukra : That we certainly should not do, sir. Of what use is our life if we let it go at that?

Pergade : *Che*!... Whose work could it be? It simply does not flash to my mind!

Jaru : Sir, I have a suspicion. It must have been his work.

Pergade : Whose?

Jaru : The other day we had gone to that fellow

Thaniya's house, hadn't we? To collect his share of the contribution? He did not give his share. Instead, he retorted roughly. When he abused you and the two of us, we were angry, and we dragged out whatever was inside, and came back.

Pergade : You did a good thing. Did that worthless fellow say he would not give his share?

Jaru : Yes. His head must have turned. He might have done it to avenge himself.

Pergade : Could that fellow who breeds cocks have the audacity to come up to our courtyard and set fire?

Thukra : I have a feeling that two men must have got together and done it. One man could not have done this. I have seen that Thaniya speak secretly to that Kanthu on two or three occasions. Both must have conspired, and secretly done this treacherous thing.

Pergade : Ah! Is that what you say? Would Kanthu stand up to challenge me? I gave him land, waived off his marriage-loan... That being the case, would he betray me?

Jaru : This is Kaliyuga now. We can never say. It is said that if we extend a helping hand in this day and age, we are sure to face trouble!

Pergade : That's true. This is the age where they bite the hand that feeds milk! We should not believe anyone. What do you say?

Thukra : That's true, sir. It's the age where the right hand cannot trust the left!... My suspicion is getting stronger and stronger... You see, neither Kanthu nor Debe has come here in two days.

Pergade : They say Kanthu has got a sprain and cannot go out to tap toddy.

Jaru : He doesn't have any sprain! It is *Guliga* who has struck him a blow. This is all a game to throw dust into others' eyes. Even that crooked fellow has some useful medicine!

Pergade : Who will they play their tricks on, man? Can a small deer sport with a large tiger? The rice he eats must have made him bilious! I will make him vomit it!

Thukra : He can kiss goodbye to food and water in this village! If anyone dare come in the way of our landlord, won't they be uprooted and left without the trace of a stump?

Jaru : Hmm! And how glibly he had spoken - like extracting a strand of hair from butter! He is an alligator hiding in the muck!

Thukra : A sarcastic snake-smile conceals a deceitful interior! *Che*! Mustn't trust anyone! How can we know which ant-hill hides a cobra?

Pergade : I will see about that. I know how to bring him out of the anthill.

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Scene Ten

[Thukra and Jaru come talking.]

Thukra : What the landlord says is true. As long as Kanthu remains alive our master will not get Debe.

Jaru : It looks like that. She treats land, livelihood, and expensive jewelry like mere rubbish, or even worse.

Thukra : If you were to beckon her and say there was a treasure-chest with gold and silver in it, she isn't the kind of woman who would come. Any other girl would go crazy at the mention of saris and ornaments. When such is the case, what kind of a haughty girl is she, man, who doesn't lovingly offer a stool for the village *gurkar* to sit on?

Jaru : But if not today, won't this parrot sit on his forearm some other day? But then Thukranna, our landlord has already married thrice, and lost all three wives. It looks like women do not suit him, doesn't it?

Thukra : Now what you say is true. Every nubile girl that our landlord touches meets her end. I can't understand what mystery this is.

Jaru : You don't know. Some people's touch is akin to poison. Otherwise, would he lose all three wives? The soil of a place, and women – the two don't always go well with everyone.

Thukra : We will see a new sport this time. All else is fine, but no matter what you say, I think coveting a chaste woman who has a husband, is not morally right.

Jaru : Why should we bother whether it is right or

not? How many favours has he not bestowed upon us? How well he has fostered us! Is it only a few who avail help from him? As for us, we just do the work we are told to, and eat the food we are served. That's all. If told to roar, we roar; if told to bark, we bark.

Thukra : All that is fine. But still, we too are human beings, aren't we? Can't we hear an inner voice within us?

Jaru : That we hear aplenty. People like us cannot survive if we were to listen to all that.

Thukra : Let that be. But what about the ploy of doing away with Kanthu?

Jaru : It shouldn't seem like we killed him. It should appear as if he died in an accident.

Thukra : How? It doesn't enter my head.

Jaru : Let us cut the rope of the bamboo-pole he uses as ladder to climb the palm tree. Then it will slip. He will break his head and die.

Thukra : That's true. But how can you be sure he will die? What if he survives with broken limbs?

Jaru : Even if he survives, what can he do? How far can a bird with broken wings fly?

Thukra : That's true. Let us search for some other ploy as well. If Debe can be caught by the landlord, let her be grabbed.

Jaru : How can she escape being caught? Let her refuse for now. But how far can a cradle tied to the roof-beam swing?

Thukra : Where will the prawn in the earthen vessel leap?

Jaru : I remember something now that you mention prawns. We had set a trap to catch fish at the edge of the pool by the side of the

field. Let's have a look at it. Catfish and barb might have been caught. Shrimp too will be leaping about there. My taste buds have turned bland without tasting fish curry for two days.

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Scene Eleven

Song of the artistes

Invisible to human eyes through dextrous divine power,
The God who manifests his glory is amidst us.
Brandishing a flaming cloth-torch
A shower of burning embers in a lovely grove
A shaft of love pierces the entrails
The whole world writhes in excruciating torment
One sheds tears, another gets showered with rose-water
Harvest-feast in one house, starvation in another
Who's there to beseech?
When sand falls into sweet-porridge
And when milk becomes sour
Who can fathom the footsteps divine
When in a ripe corn-field he descends with a flaming torch?

[The troupe of performers move aside. Pergade comes to the *daiva's* swing-cot and beseeches.]

Pergade : O Lord Jumadi, you have dwelt in this Kana manor from the time of our ancestors. You are the perfect *daiva* for those raised by one's mother, and the ones fostered by the maternal uncle alike. I can never complete

my rendition of your divine glory. You grant victory to those who entreat you. You are the ultimate truth that works as the tassel at the end of a multi-coloured shawl extended by those who prostrate before you, and who takes devotees along the path of victory. This is all I plead of you – let Kanthu's wife Debe be smitten by love for me. If you grant me this, then I will have horns and pipes blown in your honour and will arrange for a grand *Kola* with all pomp and ceremony. I shall also sacrifice two pigs at the same time to Mother *Mammaayi,* and perform the *Gondolu* worship. Do this for my sake. I have only you to fall back on. [Sets out.]

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Scene Twelve

[Kanthu's house. Kanthu and Debe are asleep. The time is of cock-crow. All at once, Debe screams in her sleep, rolls, and falls. She trembles in fear. The commotion is enough to awaken Kanthu too.]

Kanthu : Debe, Debe, what's the matter? What's it? Here. Who's this? It's me, right?

Debe : Ah, who's it? O God! Is it you? Is this true? Where are you? Where am I? How did you come here?

Kanthu : Look here. What has happened to you? You had a sound sleep. What's the matter? Why

are you staring, eyes widened? Why do you tremble like this?

Debe : Then you did not go to the forest after all? Then what was all that? That which happened there?

Kanthu : Where? What? Look here, Debe. You must have been dreaming. Look here, Debe, wake up! What is this? You act like a little child!

Debe : Will you listen to what I want to say?

Kanthu : What?

Debe : You must not go to the forest today on the hunting expedition.

Kanthu : What are you saying, Debe? When the whole village is in joy, girded up for the *Keddasa*-hunting in the forest, must I sit here, strapped with bow and arrows, legs stretched out? What has happened to you today? Tell me.

Debe : Look! I have never been stubborn with you. Nor have I ever crossed the line you have drawn. But today I plead with you. Do not go out hunting today. I fall at your feet. *Dammayya*!

Kanthu : O *karma*! Tell me what the matter is.

Debe : I just do not know what to say! I feel tongue-tied. I had a terrible nightmare.

Kanthu : *Aiyyo,* crazy girl! You might be suffering from a bile disorder. Mustn't I go to the forest merely because you had a dream?

Debe : My whole body quakes at the very thought of it. My heart trembles. It was that kind of a nightmare!

Kanthu : O, you coward! Just what did you see in that dream? Let's hear.

Debe : Ten to fifteen ghosts were dancing madly in the middle of the dark forest, flaming torches in hand. Oh, those terrible forms! There was one man in the midst of that *Gondolu* dance. His face had a pig's mask. Those evil spirits with the burning torches cut his head off and danced on his body. My ears turned deaf with the sound of their laughter.

Kanthu : Look here, Debe. There must be some ghost troubling you –of some person in your family – someone who died without getting a gulp of water. Tomorrow we shall smear you with some ash from *Balyare* community in Banni Majal.

Debe : Listen! The dream did not end there. In the melee of that *Gondolu* dance, the pig's mask fell off the face of the man who had fallen. I saw the face bathed in blood. That face... that face...

Kanthu : What happened to that face?

Debe : *Aiyyo*, how am I to tell you!...

Kanthu : What? Did you think it was my face?

Debe : [nods her head]

Kanthu : Oh, that's why you are quailing with fear, isn't it? Won't you sit quietly for once? Had a dream, she says! If you eat to your heart's content in your dream, will your stomach get filled? Just because you had a bath in your dream should you change clothes? If someone dies in your dream, should you make preparations for the bier? Just what are you saying, Debe? Absurd!

Debe : That's not all. My mind is full of apprehension since yesterday. When I woke up at dawn

and stepped onto the verandah, my leg hit the pot and it broke.

Kanthu : If the pot broke, let it go. Just think that our house is rid of bad luck. Debe, don't be apprehensive. The flower adorning your hair will not wilt.

Debe : Still, I cannot muster courage. A woodpecker has been crying out raucously since yesterday. Don't take these omens so lightly.

Kanthu : When all the hunters of the village are setting out for the great *keddasa* hunt, carrying nets, ropes, bows, arrows, sticks, and sickles, won't they brand me a female *Maindeyi bhuta* if I sit here guarding the house simply because I am petrified of omens and signs? If at least I had a sprain like I did the day before yesterday, I could use that as an excuse. But this time I have nothing of the sort, do I?

Debe : Don't say these things...

Kanthu : These things, and those things! When I say I shall go, then I will.

Debe : What more can I say? How can I tell you my heart's distress? What should I do?

Kanthua : Don't do anything else. I will get my share of meat from the hunt. Grind the spices with chillies and tamarind, and keep it ready.

Debe : What can I say? The *daiva* alone should protect you! Go carefully and return.

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Scene Thirteen

The festive breeze of the *Keddasa* hunting expedition
Blows powerfully from the east.
The parched earth gets its respite
During this period of ritual purification.

[The headman of the *Mundala* community and the troupe of artistes come on stage.]

Headman : Days rolled by in this manner. The hunting festival of *Keddasa* came on.

Artiste : What's so special about this annual hunting festival, *Anna*?

Headman : Don't you know the significance of this *Keddasa*? People of Tulunadu do not practice their ancestral vocation on these three days of the feast. No cultivation is to be done, nor is any other profession to be practised.

Artiste : But why so?

Headman : Mother Earth who bore us undergoes a three day period of ritual impurity. Hence we must not use spades and pickaxes and dig mud. Nor can we go to fields and use plough-shares. Moreover, none should go to hills and gather foliage.

Artiste : Now this is a fine predicament to be in! Then should everyone just sit silently at home, swatting flies?

Headman : *Che, che*! How do you expect the feast to take place if we are to sit quietly? As in other traditional practices, all people are brought together here too, and they all set out ceremonially on the *Keddasa* hunting expedition, roaming in the forest. Boar, sambar, and deer are gored, cut, and

apportioned to all.

Artiste : Won't they kill tigers and leopards?

Headman : Will they be spared if they are spotted? And just imagine you caught them! Can that meat be apportioned then? So forget it. The edible meat of animals that are hunted is distributed to all who assisted in the hunting expedition. Then we make rice pudding to go with it. Ritual offerings of this food is served on banana leaves to ancestors and *Bhutas.* Then all eat a sumptuous meal and dance thereafter.

Artiste : Then I suppose this *Keddasa* feast is a very grand one?

Headman : Of course. What else did you expect? When the *Keddasa* wind blows from the east...

Artiste : What happens when it blows?

Headman : Then Pergade, the landlord of Kana manor gets all the village hunters to assemble, and they all set out.

Artiste : Where do they all set out?

Headman : They all set out westwards to the small forest around, with all the required implements...

Artiste : What implements?

Headman : Armed with nets, ropes, scythes, axes, cudgels, hooks, snares, iron-rods, bows and arrows, and catapults, they call out to the hunting dogs and set forth.

Artiste : How do they set forth?

Headman : They set forth with horns, trumpets, tambourines, explosive fire-crackers, in pomp and ceremony, swelling up the whole earth and shaking the entire forest.

Song

Young men have set out for the Keddasa hunt
Rushing into the western forest
Armed with sickles, nets, ropes, axes, bows and arrows
The hunters go forth.

[The troupe of artistes and performers go in. The tumultuous sounds of the grand hunting expedition, and of drum-beats can be heard in the background... the noise gradually decreases.]

At the Keddasa hunting expedition
An animal has fallen
A ritual splattering of blood
In the small forest in the west.

[Seven or eight men come carrying Kanthu's dead body. Pergade too is there with them. They lower the body in the courtyard outside Kanthu's house.]

Pergade : Debe, O Debe! Where are you? Come here.

Debe : [Comes out and sees.] What's the matter, sir?... *Aiyyo*! Who? What happened to my god? O God! Rama Rama! *Aiyyo*! [Falls on the corpse and wails.]

Pergade : Debe, calm down, *Appe*. This happened inadvertently while we went hunting. A huge male pig that was wounded, gored Kanthu, who was waiting in the ditch. He was such an experienced Head of the hunting team. What is to be done? Who can guess which ditch *Yamaraya* can go to?

Debe : *Aiyyo,* O God! Is my chain of black beads broken? The vermilion mark on my forehead wiped off? Has the nightmare I saw turned real? O God! Do you like what has happened? Who do I have now to fall back on?

Pergade : Debe, what will you gain by crying now? Can you get back what you have lost? Show fortitude. Isn't everything a game after all that lasts just three days? Don't we all have to join him tomorrow?

Debe : O *Daiva Jumadi*, I trusted you. You too have forsaken me?

Pergade : Debe, don't cry, *Appe*. Take courage. I will not forsake you. Trust my words. Do not fear. Look, man, cut that mango tree in the dry field up there. Make preparations for the bier as soon as possible. Look Jaru, tell your wife to come here. Let her console poor Debe a little.

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Scene Fourteen

[Thaniya meets Jaru on the way. The latter is limping, hands and feet bound with cloth. Thaniya goes on without speaking.]

Jaru : Who's that? Thaniyanna? Why are you going away without speaking?

Thaniya : One must tie an areca-spathe to one's back before talking to you fellows, right? Why should I simply bang my head against a boulder?

Jaru : Don't be vexed, Thaniyanna. Some dangerous thing just happens at an inauspicious moment.

community in the south. It was a crushing defeat. He is…

Neelamma : Ha! Don't say a word more, Chenni. He is Somanath, crown-prince of the kingdom, and the son of the chief queen Somala Devi!

Chenni : Oh, now you have understood, have you?

Neelamma : I have never had too many opportunities to see him. That's why I couldn't recognise him from afar.

Chenni : When is he ever in the palace? He is either waging wars in the battle-field or is to be found in the gymnasium.

Neelamma : To which world does such beauty belong, Chenni? What a proud fortune! Somala Devi is indeed very fortunate to have such a handsome son. I wonder how much penance she undertook in her past lives to have obtained him!

Chenni : I hope such a child is born of your womb too by the grace of God, *Akka*.

Neelamma : Now what can I say about my fortune, Chenni?

Chenni : Why do you say such things? Is it any small matter to reign as a queen in the Chouta palace?

Neelamma : Chenni, is it enough to be a mere queen decked in pearls and diamonds? Why does a wooden pillar need a garland made of gold coins? Don't we need peace of mind?

Chenni : Why have you lost your peace, *Akka*? Do you hesitate to tell even me?

Neelamma : Chenni, to whom can I express the tumult

in my heart? I can neither swallow my sorrow nor throw it up. But you are no mere companion to me. I consider you my elder sister.

Chenni : Tell me, *Akka*. Open up your mind and reveal everything to me. Don't hold back anything.

Neelamma : Yes, Chenni. I will. I will unfold everything only to you. The poor king, though so old, does indeed treat me with immense love. He places me on the high pedestal of love. But what am I to do? No matter how hard I try I simply do not feel any love for him blossom within me! What am I to do? All my dreams and desires have faded away, turned to cinders.

Chenni : Why did such a thing happen, *Akka*? I cannot understand a thing.

Neelamma : When they came forth with a proposal for my wedding, I had actually presumed I was to marry the king's son Somanath. I had built colourful castles in my mind. The marriage took place anyway. The felicitous dreams I had desired never materialised. All that I had craved for turned to dust. I am a creeper doomed to climb up a rotten tree.

Chenni : *Aiyyo*, poor thing! My mind too is seething! But do not think of your fortune as all that bad. We must turn the very place we are in into heaven, *Akka*.

Neelamma : How is that possible, Chenni? How does one come out of the hell created by the mind?

Chenni : Your fortune can still come to your feet, *Akka*, if you so wish.

Neelamma : Will it come, Chenni? Will it come? Do you feel so? I cannot fathom the mysterious way in which my mind works. Myriad desires keep tossing in my bosom. I simply cannot comprehend which one is sinful, and which one virtuous, nor what is moral and what immoral.

Chenni : I would say it is possible if you make up your mind.

Neelamma : Is it so, Chenni? If such a fortune were to come my way, how could I receive it?

Chenni : Tell me, *Akka*.

Neelamma : That Somanath... That Somanath...

Chenni : What *Akka*?

Neelamma : What can I say, Chenni? Can't you understand?

Chenni : I can understand, *Akka*. I too am a woman. Won't one woman understand the joy and sorrow felt by another? Don't worry. I will arrange for Somanath to come to your chamber.

Neelamma : Will you, Chenni? Will you do this? Is it possible? Will Somanath come here?

Chenni : He will surely come, *Akka*. He will not be able to desist from coming in a day or two. Don't worry.

Neelamma : Chenni... Chenni... [Hugs her.] I consider you my sister. Think of my joys and sorrows as your own. Save me somehow. Here, take this. Keep this chain. [Gives her.]

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Scene Four

[Somanath is moving forward slowly in a dark forest, holding a small torch. Lakkana and Manjana follow him. A tiger's roar can be heard from the thicket. Just as Somanath gets ready to charge with a spear, the tiger suddenly lets out a roar and springs on him. Somanath evades the tiger and dexterously pierces it with the spear. The roar of the tiger is enough to shake the whole forest. The tiger falls dead.]

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Scene Five

[At the break of dawn Somanath and his group of friends walk along talking among themselves.]

Manjana : We have somehow managed to give chase to a huge and terrible beast, haven't we? I have been on so many hunting expeditions. But never have I seen such a large tiger! It must have measured eighteen feet, O Prince, right?

Somanath : Look here, Manjana, I have told you so often that I am prince only in the palace! You must never call me that! As members of a group playing sports, the son of the king, that of the army general, and of the steward are all equal. Do you understand?

Manjana : Yes, I understand. Now what's to be said about the matter of this tiger? Of all the

forty tigers you have hunted down till now, has any been as gigantic as this one?

Somanath : I too have never seen such a huge demonic Bengal tiger till now!

Lakkana : When I saw that tiger spring out all at once from that huge shrub I immediately thought the earth and the sky had fused together! It was as if there was a shower of red-hot coal in that darkness! All the hills and forest shook at the way he roared!

Somanath : I had aimed the spear at its forehead even as it roared and sprang upon me. When the tiger sprang with its mouth wide open, the sharp end of the spear pierced its gullet.

Manjana : You did not allow it to move. Otherwise at least one among us would have been sacrificed.

Lakkana : When he gored the tiger and swung it thrice round by its tail, an incredible stream of blood splattered on all of us like a ritual squirt of crimson water! That gargantuan Bengal tiger seemed like a mere bag of cotton in our Somanath's hands!

Manjana : How true! How many calves have fallen prey to this tiger's mouth! Haven't human beings too been sacrificed?

Somanath : When we were assigned the duty of looking after the welfare of the kingdom, such things should not have been allowed to happen. The tiger had attacked a poor old man walking on his way somewhere. Would the tiger stop itself once it had

savoured the taste of human blood? Fortunately all of that has come to an end!

Manjana : The tiger's fate was sealed the day it stopped being content with killing and eating animals of the forest and turned demonically on human beings in town instead.

Somanath : The tiger's time is up, but for us it's time to entwine the hair-tuft with the tiger's whiskers we yanked off! When it crosses all limits of greed - whether with the creatures of the forest or with the lives of human beings, it's clearly doomsday for that tiger then!

Lakkana : That's always true!

Somanath : Take for instance the case of rulers who govern their kingdoms. What was the plight of the authority of King Baira last year? What was the fate of the community in Kerala in the south?

Lakkana : Would they dare thrust their heads into the affairs of the Choutas ever again?

Somanath : When they have thousands of things within the four corners of their own kingdom to be preoccupied with, how dare they eye some other kingdom? Instead of beautifully shaping the moral world of their kingdom and looking into the joys and sorrows of their own people while working for the welfare of their subjects, what's the use of kicking and dancing around, and raising the dust in alien territories?

Manjana : The house one dwells in must be strong.

Cleverness shown by way of meddling in the affairs of others will surely invite a fitting response in the form of punitive measures.

Somanath : You are right, Manjana. Those are the very tenets of our *Dharma*. By the grace of Lord Somanath there should be no hindrance on the path we walk along.

Manjana : By the way, our Somanath's 'tiger-wedding' must take place in a grand manner.

Lakkana : Yes, oh yes! The wedding-meal must be a sumptuous one.

Somanath : You guys have no other work! I do not wish for any such ceremony and grand reception!

Manjana : So what if you do not want it? We do, don't we? We will make arrangements for it.

Somanath : The only preoccupation you have is marriage. Fine, then do whatever you wish to.

Manjana : In that case, shall we bathe and go to the temple? It's dawn.

Somanath : It has been quite a while since we had a bath in the sea. It's only when we bathe in salt water that our arms will grow strong. We also need to wash off the blood of the tiger. Let us swim four lengths along the point where the large rock juts out at Someshwar, then have a dip in the temple pond before we climb the steps of the temple.

Lakkana : Come, let's go.

[They leave.]

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Scene Five

[A group of people are singing a song and dancing.]

Song

Great prowess does a tiger-victory display
A tiger-wedding does call for a grand feast
A festoon of leaves hung over the pillar flower-decked
The pandal is decked for the tiger-wedding
They bring the tiger in a procession
Whilst the victorious hero is adorned and feted
And songs of praise are sung.
Beautifully decked is he with a bangle on the wrist
And a chain on the forearm
A tawny turban round the head
Water fetched in four pitchers
Shower of rice, pearls and corals
Ritual waving of lamps
The victor of the tiger is married
All gather to savour a meal delectable

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Scene Six

[Chenni comes towards Lakkana.]

Chenni : Look here, ahoy! Where are you headed?

Lakkana : Who's that? Chenni? Come, come!

Chenni : Looks like you have become the rare flower of the country-fig tree! Have you any idea how long it's been since one has set eyes on you?

Lakkana : All that's fine, but why do you address me with 'Look here', and 'ahoy'? Don't I have a name? Can't you call me by my name?

Chenni : My tongue refuses to roll if I were to call you by name! Forget that. Where have you been all these days?

Lakkana : I was engrossed in the hustle and bustle of the temple feast. When I go to fight on the battlefield and see the bloodbath there, I forget everything here. When I am at the gymnasium out-house I am wrapped up in the physical exercises. Somanath has great trust in me. Being in his company is such a joyous and festive thing.

Chenni : Isn't that so? The prince is the apple of everyone's eye.

Lakkana : Where's the least doubt about that? By the way, where are you going, Chenni?

Chenni : I came to see you. It's as if the medicinal vine I was looking for has entwined my leg.

Lakkana : Is there anything else that's special? It's nothing new for all kinds of things to happen within the palace.

Chenni : See, I have come here trusting you. I need you to do something for me. You must not say you won't!

Lakkana : Chenni, I would do anything for your sake. Should I cross seven seas and string pearls together and get them? Shall I drain the water of nine lakes? I will jump off the jutting rock at Someshwar if you tell me to!

Chenni : *Che! Che!* Just forget all that! It isn't such a

great feat as all that. It's a very small task.

Lakkana : What's it? Let's hear it!

Chenni : Our prince Somanath is crazy about the game of ball, isn't he? Will you arrange for a game tomorrow?

Lakkana : Is that all? What's the big fuss about that? Will it cost a fortune? It isn't a novel thing to play a game of ball, is it?

Chenni : Not on the usual playground. You should arrange for a men's game by the side of the palace chamber of our young queen Neelammaji.

Lakkana : Why do you say we should play the game there?

Chenni : The queen says she desires to see a game of ball.

Lakkana : Really? Fine then!

Chenni : That's not all. While the queen is watching the game you must ensure that one ball bounces into the queen's chamber upstairs.

Lakkana : That's no big deal! But why all these tricks?

Chenni : I shall tell you everything later. Would I hide anything from you? Tell me, would you do this much?

Lakkana : How many times do I tell you I am not one who breaks a promise? A banana plant puts out only one bunch of fruits. Do you understand? That's all you want, right? Leave that to me!

Chenni : Do this much. We can talk of everything else later!

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Scene Seven

[Queen Neelammaji is sleeping on her cot in her chamber. Somanath enters in the dim light of dawn. The queen feels a thrill of joy and sits up.]

Neelamma : Oh, have you come, Somu? Come, come. Sit down!

Song

Oh, have you come? Do come, O tassel of my fortune
O rare flower of the country-fig tree, my pearl string
You have manifested yourself as a Chief
From the celestial world above in a dream

Somanath:

My mind is besotted with a beautiful wave
Dancing across a blue sea
Delightful foamy tide
Laughing in a gushing flow
A new ritual bath in a whirlpool

Neelamma:

You are on the other bank
And I am on this side
Take care and come dancing across
The lofty bridge of love
Aren't you the cynosure of fortunate eyes?

Somanath:

O beloved jasmine
Auspicious lamp on the swing-cot
In the upper-storey of the mind
Obtained by past merit,
A bright heavenly effulgence

The world needs to be called now
By a new name

Neelamma:

O unreachable flower of the distant skies
The palm shows the writing of fortune
The wealth of royal power over thousands
Writing on the hand that's come with great affection
Oh, do once come as the full-moon
Make the sea swell with the tide
Immerse me in the colourful water of joy

[The queen comes forward with arms outstretched. Somanath evades her and suddenly disappears. The queen wakes up. The stage is lit up.]

Neelamma : Somu, my Somu, where have you gone? Where have you vanished? How did you manage to give me the slip? Have you pushed me into pitch darkness just when the full-moon has come up? How did you have the heart to do this? Are you angry with me? Won't you ever come here again? *Aiyyo*! What's the matter with me? My heart's hammering; my hair stands on end; was that a dream I saw? Was it a lie I beheld, Somanath? *Che*! I can still see that lovely form right in front of me! Somu. Soma, it's impossible for me to forget you. Come what may, I cannot rest in peace till I get you. Whatever has to happen can happen, and the world can turn topsy-turvy if need be. But I want you. Have pity on me, Somu. Save me... save me...

[Darkness on the stage.]

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Scene Eight

[Scene of the ball-game. The tumult of exultation. The young men are nudging the ball along with great enthusiasm. Suddenly the ball bounces up and reaches the queen Neelamma's chamber on the upper storey. Somanath goes to the queen's apartment to fetch the ball.]

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Scene Nine

[Neelammaji picks the ball that has landed at her feet, kisses it, and presses it to her bosom. Then she keeps it in the pouch of her clothes.]

Neelamma : Aha! What I had longed for has come within my reach. Have I the will to spurn the treasure of the tasselled ornament that has fallen into my hands? [By this time Somanath comes.]

Somanath : Has my ball bounced in and fallen over here, *Chikkammaji*?

Neelamma : Oh! Has the crown prince come? Come, come! Do sit.

Somanath : *Chikkammaji*, please do not call me prince. Why should a son be bestowed such unnecessary honour and pomp?

Neelamma : Let that be, Somu. Come, sit. It's so lovely that you have come.

Somanath : Has my pearl-ball rolled in here?

Neelamma : [Laughs] What are you saying, Somu?

Pearl-ball? Whose ball? Where has it gone?

Somanath : We were playing with the ball, *Chikkammaji*. Who knows how it shot up and fell here? It must have fallen where you are sitting.

Neelamma : Oho! Seeing me sitting in the sky-parlour of the upper storey the ball must have been aimed here and has gone missing!

Somanath : I did not throw the ball, Mother. Please pardon me if it fell on your body. It wasn't done on purpose. Someone must have hit it in the heat of the moment. Child-like playfulness! I will see to it that the ball isn't kicked up here in future.

Neelamma : Sometimes things that are never thought of do occur, Somu. Those that are wished for never happen.

Somanath : Where's the ball, *Chikkammaji*?

Neelamma : Just in case the ball did reach here, can it be returned just so, Somu?

Somanath : What's this, *Chikkammaji*? Haven't I asked for forgiveness profusely enough?

Neelamma : It's not enough if you orally plead forgiveness, Somu... By the way, why do you remain standing? Sit. Let us sit and talk.

Somanath : No, *Chikkammaji*. All my young companions are waiting for me on the playground. I am getting late. Would you return the ball?

Neelamma : You come here as rare as the hail-storm! Come, Somu, dispel the fatigue of playing the ball-game. Have a drink. Wipe off the

sweat. Sit for a while on this decorated cot. Just see how your face has flushed red with all that playing in the hot sun!

Somanath : No, *Chikkammaji*. I am not all that tired and thirsty.

Neelamma : Don't you have even a moment's time to sit and talk, Somu? Or is it that you do not wish to talk to me?

Somanath : Don't say that, *Chikkammaji*. I too wish to have a hearty conversation with you.

Neelamma : Say so, Somu. Now, that's a truly precious sentiment you have voiced! Sit down. I will bring milk and fruits for you. Let us laugh and frolic, and speak for a few moments. No matter how much one listens to your wonderful talk it's never enough!

Somanath : I had come here to get the pearl-ball, for now, *Chikkammaji*. I shall come again some other day to sit and talk as much as you want me to.

Neelamma : Not once, Somu. Keep coming a thousand times. But I shall not let you go away in such haste today.

Somanath : My young friends are waiting down below; don't restrain me, *Chikkammaji*. You do not know the pleasure of playing that game. My mind is entirely on the playground now.

Neelamma : My mind too was on the game, Somu. I was having my heart's fill watching your beautiful play, Somu. I did not cast a look at anyone else on the ground. You were bounding around like lightning. To and fro, here and there! [She touches

Somanath's body to ward off the evil-eye.] Let no evil eye fall on you!

Somanath : A mother's eye can never be evil and will not harm the child, *Chikkammaji*!

Neelamma : Somu, am I not younger than you? I don't like you addressing me as mother and step-mother, Somu.

Somanath : How else should I address the queen whose hand my father has held in marriage, *Chikkammaji*?

Neelamma : Fine, then! What does it matter how you hail me? The love we have in our heart is what truly matters, doesn't it? Never mind that. Tell me what you felt when that ball flew here and fell onto the upper storey.

Somanath : How am I to say that?

Neelamma : It was like a fresh summer shower of rain experienced by the flower-garden of my mind, chafing in the heat till then. It was like a hungry man sitting, mouth agape till a delicious plantain fell into his hands.

Somanath : Are you creating a poem, *Chikkammaji*?

Neelamma : Ah, see the mocking smile you have! Doesn't your spirit create poetry, Somu? Let it be. Shall I tell you a matter of truth, Somu?

Somanath : Tell me, *Chikkammaji*. Why do you hesitate?

Neelamma : Yes. Why should one go round in circles while telling the truth? Actually, Somu, when our Ajile palace received a proposal from your palace asking for my hand in marriage, I thought you were the groom, and my joy knew no bounds. I

community in the south. It was a crushing defeat. He is…

Neelamma : Ha! Don't say a word more, Chenni. He is Somanath, crown-prince of the kingdom, and the son of the chief queen Somala Devi!

Chenni : Oh, now you have understood, have you?

Neelamma : I have never had too many opportunities to see him. That's why I couldn't recognise him from afar.

Chenni : When is he ever in the palace? He is either waging wars in the battle-field or is to be found in the gymnasium.

Neelamma : To which world does such beauty belong, Chenni? What a proud fortune! Somala Devi is indeed very fortunate to have such a handsome son. I wonder how much penance she undertook in her past lives to have obtained him!

Chenni : I hope such a child is born of your womb too by the grace of God, *Akka.*

Neelamma : Now what can I say about my fortune, Chenni?

Chenni : Why do you say such things? Is it any small matter to reign as a queen in the Chouta palace?

Neelamma : Chenni, is it enough to be a mere queen decked in pearls and diamonds? Why does a wooden pillar need a garland made of gold coins? Don't we need peace of mind?

Chenni : Why have you lost your peace, *Akka*? Do you hesitate to tell even me?

Neelamma : Chenni, to whom can I express the tumult

in my heart? I can neither swallow my sorrow nor throw it up. But you are no mere companion to me. I consider you my elder sister.

Chenni : Tell me, *Akka*. Open up your mind and reveal everything to me. Don't hold back anything.

Neelamma : Yes, Chenni. I will. I will unfold everything only to you. The poor king, though so old, does indeed treat me with immense love. He places me on the high pedestal of love. But what am I to do? No matter how hard I try I simply do not feel any love for him blossom within me! What am I to do? All my dreams and desires have faded away, turned to cinders.

Chenni : Why did such a thing happen, *Akka*? I cannot understand a thing.

Neelamma : When they came forth with a proposal for my wedding, I had actually presumed I was to marry the king's son Somanath. I had built colourful castles in my mind. The marriage took place anyway. The felicitous dreams I had desired never materialised. All that I had craved for turned to dust. I am a creeper doomed to climb up a rotten tree.

Chenni : *Aiyyo*, poor thing! My mind too is seething! But do not think of your fortune as all that bad. We must turn the very place we are in into heaven, *Akka*.

Neelamma : How is that possible, Chenni? How does one come out of the hell created by the mind?

Chenni : Your fortune can still come to your feet, *Akka*, if you so wish.

Neelamma : Will it come, Chenni? Will it come? Do you feel so? I cannot fathom the mysterious way in which my mind works. Myriad desires keep tossing in my bosom. I simply cannot comprehend which one is sinful, and which one virtuous, nor what is moral and what immoral.

Chenni : I would say it is possible if you make up your mind.

Neelamma : Is it so, Chenni? If such a fortune were to come my way, how could I receive it?

Chenni : Tell me, *Akka.*

Neelamma : That Somanath... That Somanath...

Chenni : What *Akka*?

Neelamma : What can I say, Chenni? Can't you understand?

Chenni : I can understand, *Akka*. I too am a woman. Won't one woman understand the joy and sorrow felt by another? Don't worry. I will arrange for Somanath to come to your chamber.

Neelamma : Will you, Chenni? Will you do this? Is it possible? Will Somanath come here?

Chenni : He will surely come, *Akka*. He will not be able to desist from coming in a day or two. Don't worry.

Neelamma : Chenni... Chenni... [Hugs her.] I consider you my sister. Think of my joys and sorrows as your own. Save me somehow. Here, take this. Keep this chain. [Gives her.]

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Scene Four

[Somanath is moving forward slowly in a dark forest, holding a small torch. Lakkana and Manjana follow him. A tiger's roar can be heard from the thicket. Just as Somanath gets ready to charge with a spear, the tiger suddenly lets out a roar and springs on him. Somanath evades the tiger and dexterously pierces it with the spear. The roar of the tiger is enough to shake the whole forest. The tiger falls dead.]

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Scene Five

[At the break of dawn Somanath and his group of friends walk along talking among themselves.]

Manjana : We have somehow managed to give chase to a huge and terrible beast, haven't we? I have been on so many hunting expeditions. But never have I seen such a large tiger! It must have measured eighteen feet, O Prince, right?

Somanath : Look here, Manjana, I have told you so often that I am prince only in the palace! You must never call me that! As members of a group playing sports, the son of the king, that of the army general, and of the steward are all equal. Do you understand?

Manjana : Yes, I understand. Now what's to be said about the matter of this tiger? Of all the

forty tigers you have hunted down till now, has any been as gigantic as this one?

Somanath : I too have never seen such a huge demonic Bengal tiger till now!

Lakkana : When I saw that tiger spring out all at once from that huge shrub I immediately thought the earth and the sky had fused together! It was as if there was a shower of red-hot coal in that darkness! All the hills and forest shook at the way he roared!

Somanath : I had aimed the spear at its forehead even as it roared and sprang upon me. When the tiger sprang with its mouth wide open, the sharp end of the spear pierced its gullet.

Manjana : You did not allow it to move. Otherwise at least one among us would have been sacrificed.

Lakkana : When he gored the tiger and swung it thrice round by its tail, an incredible stream of blood splattered on all of us like a ritual squirt of crimson water! That gargantuan Bengal tiger seemed like a mere bag of cotton in our Somanath's hands!

Manjana : How true! How many calves have fallen prey to this tiger's mouth! Haven't human beings too been sacrificed?

Somanath : When we were assigned the duty of looking after the welfare of the kingdom, such things should not have been allowed to happen. The tiger had attacked a poor old man walking on his way somewhere. Would the tiger stop itself once it had

savoured the taste of human blood? Fortunately all of that has come to an end!

Manjana : The tiger's fate was sealed the day it stopped being content with killing and eating animals of the forest and turned demonically on human beings in town instead.

Somanath : The tiger's time is up, but for us it's time to entwine the hair-tuft with the tiger's whiskers we yanked off! When it crosses all limits of greed - whether with the creatures of the forest or with the lives of human beings, it's clearly doomsday for that tiger then!

Lakkana : That's always true!

Somanath : Take for instance the case of rulers who govern their kingdoms. What was the plight of the authority of King Baira last year? What was the fate of the community in Kerala in the south?

Lakkana : Would they dare thrust their heads into the affairs of the Choutas ever again?

Somanath : When they have thousands of things within the four corners of their own kingdom to be preoccupied with, how dare they eye some other kingdom? Instead of beautifully shaping the moral world of their kingdom and looking into the joys and sorrows of their own people while working for the welfare of their subjects, what's the use of kicking and dancing around, and raising the dust in alien territories?

Manjana : The house one dwells in must be strong.

Cleverness shown by way of meddling in the affairs of others will surely invite a fitting response in the form of punitive measures.

Somanath : You are right, Manjana. Those are the very tenets of our *Dharma*. By the grace of Lord Somanath there should be no hindrance on the path we walk along.

Manjana : By the way, our Somanath's 'tiger-wedding' must take place in a grand manner.

Lakkana : Yes, oh yes! The wedding-meal must be a sumptuous one.

Somanath : You guys have no other work! I do not wish for any such ceremony and grand reception!

Manjana : So what if you do not want it? We do, don't we? We will make arrangements for it.

Somanath : The only preoccupation you have is marriage. Fine, then do whatever you wish to.

Manjana : In that case, shall we bathe and go to the temple? It's dawn.

Somanath : It has been quite a while since we had a bath in the sea. It's only when we bathe in salt water that our arms will grow strong. We also need to wash off the blood of the tiger. Let us swim four lengths along the point where the large rock juts out at Someshwar, then have a dip in the temple pond before we climb the steps of the temple.

Lakkana : Come, let's go.

[They leave.]

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Scene Five

[A group of people are singing a song and dancing.]

Song

Great prowess does a tiger-victory display
A tiger-wedding does call for a grand feast
A festoon of leaves hung over the pillar flower-decked
The pandal is decked for the tiger-wedding
They bring the tiger in a procession
Whilst the victorious hero is adorned and feted
And songs of praise are sung.
Beautifully decked is he with a bangle on the wrist
And a chain on the forearm
A tawny turban round the head
Water fetched in four pitchers
Shower of rice, pearls and corals
Ritual waving of lamps
The victor of the tiger is married
All gather to savour a meal delectable

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Scene Six

[Chenni comes towards Lakkana.]

Chenni : Look here, ahoy! Where are you headed?

Lakkana : Who's that? Chenni? Come, come!

Chenni : Looks like you have become the rare flower of the country-fig tree! Have you any idea how long it's been since one has set eyes on you?

Lakkana : All that's fine, but why do you address me with 'Look here', and 'ahoy'? Don't I have a name? Can't you call me by my name?

Chenni : My tongue refuses to roll if I were to call you by name! Forget that. Where have you been all these days?

Lakkana : I was engrossed in the hustle and bustle of the temple feast. When I go to fight on the battlefield and see the bloodbath there, I forget everything here. When I am at the gymnasium out-house I am wrapped up in the physical exercises. Somanath has great trust in me. Being in his company is such a joyous and festive thing.

Chenni : Isn't that so? The prince is the apple of everyone's eye.

Lakkana : Where's the least doubt about that? By the way, where are you going, Chenni?

Chenni : I came to see you. It's as if the medicinal vine I was looking for has entwined my leg.

Lakkana : Is there anything else that's special? It's nothing new for all kinds of things to happen within the palace.

Chenni : See, I have come here trusting you. I need you to do something for me. You must not say you won't!

Lakkana : Chenni, I would do anything for your sake. Should I cross seven seas and string pearls together and get them? Shall I drain the water of nine lakes? I will jump off the jutting rock at Someshwar if you tell me to!

Chenni : *Che! Che!* Just forget all that! It isn't such a

great feat as all that. It's a very small task.

Lakkana : What's it? Let's hear it!

Chenni : Our prince Somanath is crazy about the game of ball, isn't he? Will you arrange for a game tomorrow?

Lakkana : Is that all? What's the big fuss about that? Will it cost a fortune? It isn't a novel thing to play a game of ball, is it?

Chenni : Not on the usual playground. You should arrange for a men's game by the side of the palace chamber of our young queen Neelammaji.

Lakkana : Why do you say we should play the game there?

Chenni : The queen says she desires to see a game of ball.

Lakkana : Really? Fine then!

Chenni : That's not all. While the queen is watching the game you must ensure that one ball bounces into the queen's chamber upstairs.

Lakkana : That's no big deal! But why all these tricks?

Chenni : I shall tell you everything later. Would I hide anything from you? Tell me, would you do this much?

Lakkana : How many times do I tell you I am not one who breaks a promise? A banana plant puts out only one bunch of fruits. Do you understand? That's all you want, right? Leave that to me!

Chenni : Do this much. We can talk of everything else later!

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Scene Seven

[Queen Neelammaji is sleeping on her cot in her chamber. Somanath enters in the dim light of dawn. The queen feels a thrill of joy and sits up.]

Neelamma : Oh, have you come, Somu? Come, come. Sit down!

Song

Oh, have you come? Do come, O tassel of my fortune
O rare flower of the country-fig tree, my pearl string
You have manifested yourself as a Chief
From the celestial world above in a dream

Somanath:

My mind is besotted with a beautiful wave
Dancing across a blue sea
Delightful foamy tide
Laughing in a gushing flow
A new ritual bath in a whirlpool

Neelamma:

You are on the other bank
And I am on this side
Take care and come dancing across
The lofty bridge of love
Aren't you the cynosure of fortunate eyes?

Somanath:

O beloved jasmine
Auspicious lamp on the swing-cot
In the upper-storey of the mind
Obtained by past merit,
A bright heavenly effulgence

The world needs to be called now
By a new name

Neelamma:

O unreachable flower of the distant skies
The palm shows the writing of fortune
The wealth of royal power over thousands
Writing on the hand that's come with great affection
Oh, do once come as the full-moon
Make the sea swell with the tide
Immerse me in the colourful water of joy

[The queen comes forward with arms outstretched. Somanath evades her and suddenly disappears. The queen wakes up. The stage is lit up.]

Neelamma : Somu, my Somu, where have you gone? Where have you vanished? How did you manage to give me the slip? Have you pushed me into pitch darkness just when the full-moon has come up? How did you have the heart to do this? Are you angry with me? Won't you ever come here again? *Aiyyo*! What's the matter with me? My heart's hammering; my hair stands on end; was that a dream I saw? Was it a lie I beheld, Somanath? *Che*! I can still see that lovely form right in front of me! Somu. Soma, it's impossible for me to forget you. Come what may, I cannot rest in peace till I get you. Whatever has to happen can happen, and the world can turn topsy-turvy if need be. But I want you. Have pity on me, Somu. Save me... save me...
[Darkness on the stage.]

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Scene Eight

[Scene of the ball-game. The tumult of exultation. The young men are nudging the ball along with great enthusiasm. Suddenly the ball bounces up and reaches the queen Neelamma's chamber on the upper storey. Somanath goes to the queen's apartment to fetch the ball.]

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Scene Nine

[Neelammaji picks the ball that has landed at her feet, kisses it, and presses it to her bosom. Then she keeps it in the pouch of her clothes.]

Neelamma : Aha! What I had longed for has come within my reach. Have I the will to spurn the treasure of the tasselled ornament that has fallen into my hands? [By this time Somanath comes.]

Somanath : Has my ball bounced in and fallen over here, *Chikkammaji*?

Neelamma : Oh! Has the crown prince come? Come, come! Do sit.

Somanath : *Chikkammaji*, please do not call me prince. Why should a son be bestowed such unnecessary honour and pomp?

Neelamma : Let that be, Somu. Come, sit. It's so lovely that you have come.

Somanath : Has my pearl-ball rolled in here?

Neelamma : [Laughs] What are you saying, Somu?

Pearl-ball? Whose ball? Where has it gone?

Somanath : We were playing with the ball, *Chikkammaji*. Who knows how it shot up and fell here? It must have fallen where you are sitting.

Neelamma : Oho! Seeing me sitting in the sky-parlour of the upper storey the ball must have been aimed here and has gone missing!

Somanath : I did not throw the ball, Mother. Please pardon me if it fell on your body. It wasn't done on purpose. Someone must have hit it in the heat of the moment. Child-like playfulness! I will see to it that the ball isn't kicked up here in future.

Neelamma : Sometimes things that are never thought of do occur, Somu. Those that are wished for never happen.

Somanath : Where's the ball, *Chikkammaji*?

Neelamma : Just in case the ball did reach here, can it be returned just so, Somu?

Somanath : What's this, *Chikkammaji*? Haven't I asked for forgiveness profusely enough?

Neelamma : It's not enough if you orally plead forgiveness, Somu... By the way, why do you remain standing? Sit. Let us sit and talk.

Somanath : No, *Chikkammaji*. All my young companions are waiting for me on the playground. I am getting late. Would you return the ball?

Neelamma : You come here as rare as the hail-storm! Come, Somu, dispel the fatigue of playing the ball-game. Have a drink. Wipe off the

sweat. Sit for a while on this decorated cot. Just see how your face has flushed red with all that playing in the hot sun!

Somanath : No, *Chikkammaji*. I am not all that tired and thirsty.

Neelamma : Don't you have even a moment's time to sit and talk, Somu? Or is it that you do not wish to talk to me?

Somanath : Don't say that, *Chikkammaji*. I too wish to have a hearty conversation with you.

Neelamma : Say so, Somu. Now, that's a truly precious sentiment you have voiced! Sit down. I will bring milk and fruits for you. Let us laugh and frolic, and speak for a few moments. No matter how much one listens to your wonderful talk it's never enough!

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Neelamma : Not once, Somu. Keep coming a thousand times. But I shall not let you go away in such haste today.

Somanath : My young friends are waiting down below; don't restrain me, *Chikkammaji*. You do not know the pleasure of playing that game. My mind is entirely on the playground now.

Neelamma : My mind too was on the game, Somu. I was having my heart's fill watching your beautiful play, Somu. I did not cast a look at anyone else on the ground. You were bounding around like lightning. To and fro, here and there! [She touches

Somanath's body to ward off the evil-eye.] Let no evil eye fall on you!

Somanath : A mother's eye can never be evil and will not harm the child, *Chikkammaji*!

Neelamma : Somu, am I not younger than you? I don't like you addressing me as mother and step-mother, Somu.

Somanath : How else should I address the queen whose hand my father has held in marriage, *Chikkammaji*?

Neelamma : Fine, then! What does it matter how you hail me? The love we have in our heart is what truly matters, doesn't it? Never mind that. Tell me what you felt when that ball flew here and fell onto the upper storey.

Somanath : How am I to say that?

Neelamma : It was like a fresh summer shower of rain experienced by the flower-garden of my mind, chafing in the heat till then. It was like a hungry man sitting, mouth agape till a delicious plantain fell into his hands.

Somanath : Are you creating a poem, *Chikkammaji*?

Neelamma : Ah, see the mocking smile you have! Doesn't your spirit create poetry, Somu? Let it be. Shall I tell you a matter of truth, Somu?

Somanath : Tell me, *Chikkammaji*. Why do you hesitate?

Neelamma : Yes. Why should one go round in circles while telling the truth? Actually, Somu, when our Ajile palace received a proposal from your palace asking for my hand in marriage, I thought you were the groom, and my joy knew no bounds. I

was floating in the well-spring of bliss. The fame of your valour and your daring nature had already reached my ears. I built castles in the air… The marriage took place. My unwilling body was given away in marriage to your father, solemnised by the pouring of water. My dream shattered! I wonder what miraculous power has now rendered whole that very dream yet again, Somu, and is here right before my eyes!

Somanath : What's the use of sleep-talking to me now about past matters, *Sidyappe*? Can one cross the line drawn by God?

Neelamma : See, you are rubbing salt yet again into my wounds! Is there no meaning to the desires that seethe in a woman's mind, Somu?

Somanath : I am none to say there is no meaning. But those desires that have neither beauty nor form, and are not based on the foundation of ethics and moral practices have no meaning, have they? I have no time to spare now to sit here and talk of these things. Give me the ball, *Sidyappe*. They are waiting for me.

Neelamma : It is true those young men are awaiting you in the playground. But don't you feel any pity for me when I await you day and night, writhing in pain in this infernal chamber?

Somanath : I have no time to engage in a dalliance with my *Chikkamma* and talk idly with her…

Neelamma : Your ball has become more important than me, hasn't it?

Somanath : This is no common ball. They say my maternal uncle Sankanna Chouta and my grandfather Chinnaraya Chouta have played with it! They say it is a ball with great supernatural powers!

Neelamma : That's fine, Somu. But why can't you understand that this miraculous ball has come here? Just see how this very ball has pulled you and brought you here. I thought I should place this ball on the silver throne, decorate it, smear sandalwood paste on it, adorn it with flowers, and worship it. I felt that all the past merit accrued to me had come here. Can I let this bounty that has arrived here, slip away?

Somanath : But *Chikkammaji*, the stains of sin must not be allowed to associate with things of virtue, must they? Should pure gold be mixed with brass?

Neelamma : What is sin, Somu? Is worship of love a sin? Don't narrate tales of virtue and vice to me! Isn't it a sin when an old man, well past his prime, despite having a horde of wives, still marries a nubile girl and showers the flower garden of her dreams with live coal embers? Is it a sin for a woman caught in a perilous whirlpool of deceit to love a man who is a suitable match for her in looks, youthfulness, and education?

Somanath : *Chikkamma*, I do not have the ability to weigh and gauge virtue and vice. I too

can understand the secret turmoil of your mind. But what can be done about it? I would not desire such things even in my wildest dream. Can the fate that's inscribed on one's forehead be erased with water? I am certainly not someone who will betray my father because of the lustful dalliance of the heart, and turn my back on *Dharma*, and descend into hell. You are akin to my mother Somala Devi.

Neelamma : Somu, do you too believe in those poems on heaven and hell? A son is allowed to saddle the father's horse, ascend the father's throne, sit in his palanquin, eat off the father's dining plate, and swing the sword the father has wielded. All that is no sin. Only this is sinful?

Somanath : *Chikkammaji*, I do not possess the intelligence to argue these things out. But don't gauge physical beauty and drag me into a conversation, in the way a lamp would attract a moth. Don't corrupt yourself and destroy me too absolutely just for the sake of momentary pleasure. Don't plunge into sin and pile up evil deeds. Do not jeopardise the name of the family!

Neelamma : So what if it is momentary pleasure? That very moment will be an auspicious one! It will be that sacred moment of full tide in the sea of life. Isn't it far more beautiful to flower like a jasmine for a single day than to lie still for a thousand years like a rock? Tell me, Somu. I cannot manage to

forget you. The inner voice of my being keeps calling out, "Somu, Somu!" How am I to control myself? Do once embrace this body of mine, burning with desire at the very thought of you…

Somanath : [Closing his ears.] *Chi*! You seem to utter the first thing that comes to your head. O queen of the Chouta kingdom, have you sold away every trace of honour, dignity, modesty, and shame? Only holy water should come from the conch shell used for libation. It should not spout muck! Such imbecilic behaviour does not befit you.

Neelamma : Rebuke me as much as you wish to. Pummel me on my back if you want to! I am yours forever. You alone are my beloved king. I live for you alone. If not for you, this entire palace would be a mere prison! This body of mine would simply be a lifeless wax-doll!

Somanath : Do not pull me into the current of your coquettish talk, *Chikkammaji*.

Neelamma : Don't say that, Soma. Blow like the soothing sea breeze and cool this burning body of mine. Remain as the mainstay of this body! Imprint the seal of your lips on these eyes of mine that are overflowing with tears! Once, only once…

Somanath : *Chi*! I shall not stay here a moment longer listening to such wrongful talk! Never mind if you refuse to give the ball. I am off. [Takes a step forward.]

Neelamma : [Clutching his feet] Where are you going without satiating me, Somu? Will I

let you go?

Somanath : [Pulling his leg] Fie, O sinner! Will you let go of me or not? [He frees himself and rushes out.]

Neelamma : [Tears her clothes, breaks her bangles, and is distraught.] Sinner who fails to understand the secret of a woman's mind! Stone-hearted butcher! Shame on your cruelty! You have destroyed my life. You disregarded my status, struck at a vital and vulnerable part, and walked off, didn't you? Will I let you off till you bite the dust?... [Crying] Chenni... Chenni... Everything is ruined... Chenni...

[Curtain]

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Scene Ten

Narrator:

How is it possible to comprehend
The amazing glory of splendid feats divine
When, concealed from view,
A game of ball is played in unison?
But the hidden mystery of divine disposition
Is beyond one's ken to grasp
Who can stall the hand of the One who operates?
Who tramples the crown of the head
And crows thrice thereafter?
None can comprehend the essence of love

Brought on by a bewitching infatuation
For what is displayed incessantly
By night and day as Beauty.
But who is it that bides the opportune moment,
Flaming torch held aloft,
Waiting to fling the noose
And grip the forelocks
So as to entice a rhythmic dance
Thandana thaanana?

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Scene Eleven

[The king has completed his hunting expedition and starts towards the palace. When he goes to Neelamma's chamber he cannot find any trace of her. He goes searching for her and finds her lying on the bed, fully veiled.]

King : Neela, Neela!

Neelamma : [Silent]

King : What's this, Neela? All covered up and sleeping?

Neelamma : [Does not speak.]

King : [Comes close and parts the veil.] Neela, what is this? What is this state of yours, Neela? Are you my very own Neela, or aren't you? Why are you so upset? Neela, speak to me, Neela. When I last saw you before I went hunting, you were laughing and dancing in joy. What happened thereafter? Aren't you keeping well?

Should I send for the royal physician?

Neelamma : My lord, my lord! What am I to say?

King : Tell me what is wrong with you, Neela…

Neelamma : It isn't some pain that calls for a physician, my lord… my lord…

King : What then? I cannot understand what you say, Neela. It looks like you have something to conceal from me.

Neelamma : Where would I go if I had to hide things from you, Lord? Do I have to hide from you and still live? *Aiyyo*! I cannot swallow it, nor throw up this matter. That's my plight.

King : What is it that is bothering you? Do explain everything clearly, Neela.

Neelamma : If you insist, I will tell you the matter, my lord. But you might not believe it. Why you? No one might believe it. Why should I disclose it and corrupt my tongue in vain?

King : What are you saying, Neela? Won't I trust your words? You are the most precious thing in my life, the emerald pendant round my neck! Do I need to elaborate that I would offer up my entire kingdom for your sake? And you say I won't believe you? How do you have the heart to even say this?

Neelamma : My whole mind is distraught, my lord. What am I to do? You are trying to get things out of my mouth. I still say the same thing. My words might not be pleasing to your ears. The need for revenge might pierce you like an arrow!

King : I can understand that something has grieved your mind, Neela. Whatever it is, tell me everything without fear or hesitation. My whole body is assailed by the turmoil of not knowing what's bothering you. Just tell me, Neela! [Touches her hand.]

Neelamma : [Snatching her hand away.] Don't touch me, my lord, don't touch me! If you touch me you too will rot away like me. This body of mine is a mere log of wood that has forfeited the fortune of touching you! Do not touch me and get polluted!

King : *Che, che*! What are you saying, Neela? You alone are the main entrance to this precious palace of mine. You are like auspicious silver to me. Why do you say such things to me? How have I hurt you? Has someone else maliciously been filling your mind with worthless talk? Tell me quickly. I will yank their tongue out and have them impaled at the stake!

Neelamma : I will tell you, my lord. Don't be flustered. You have just returned from the hills and forest after a hunting expedition. You must be parched with thirst. Listen to what I have to say after you quench your thirst.

King : Is that intoxicant more important than what you have to say? Besides, don't I know that you are not very happy about my habit of downing intoxicating drinks? Then why say such a thing?

Neelamma : At times when things happen that pierce

the ears, and make the eyes blaze with fire, then the distraught mind sees the intoxicating drink as nectar. One also gets a little courage. The mind too becomes a little calm.

King : If you do not explain what the matter is, how am I to know?

Neelamma : Wait, my lord, I will tell you… [Goes to a side.] Chenni… Chenni…

Chenni : [Comes.] *Akka*?...

Neelamma : Fetch that beverage-pitcher here.

[Chenni fetches the gold-pitcher. The queen pours out the liquor into a smaller cup and offers it to the king. He sips it slowly.]

King : Hm. Tell me now, Neela, do tell me.

Neelamma : Yes, my lord, I shall tell you, and end my story. What's the use of blaming anyone when the writing on my forehead is all awry? After crossing over to the other side of the sea the body will perforce have to flow along with the tossing force of the tempest, won't it? My lord, you shouldn't have gone on the hunting expedition the other day.

King : Why? Haven't I gone earlier? What happened in my absence? And what if I wasn't around? Wasn't our crown-prince Somanath here to shoulder all the responsibilities of our kingdom? When he's around it is just as if I were. I have absolutely no care then!

Neelamma : Ah, what did you say? That if the prince is around it would be just like you were present? You are right. In a way that's

exactly what happened!

King : What? What is it that happened, Neela? Don't vex me by beating about the bush. Tell it in a plain manner.

Neelamma : Alright, my lord, I shall tell it as it is. I have no idea what it is to play the coquette and use wiles. But then, words have to elicit an apt action, don't they? You will mete out a fitting order against the one who has perpetrated an injustice, won't you?

King : Is it a new thing that truth and justice are placed on a high pedestal in the Chouta kingdom while a sharp pike on a platform awaits the unjust? I swear by my beloved queen's neck that I shall destroy the very seed of injustice. Which wild cat plucked the courage to ruffle the feathers of my beautiful parrot in the gilded cage? I shall have him trampled underfoot by an elephant. I shall give him a lashing with the horse-whip. I will have him pushed down the moat of the fort's military camp. I shall chop off his neck. I shall spill his entrails.

Neelamma : Have you understood why your beloved son stayed back here instead of joining the hunting expedition?

King : Why, Neela?

Neelamma : To play with the ball.

King : Isn't it common for youngsters to play a game of ball?

Neelamma : Why throw the ball on the balcony next to my chamber? Let them play with the ball. That's not a problem. But should the

ball be aimed at my chamber on purpose? Your beloved son came here just after the ball did!

King : He must have come to take the ball back.

Neelamma : You presume that all that is white is milk. You do not see the worms infesting the milk.

King : What happened, Neela?

Neelamma : What am I to say? Somu came close to me under the pretext of the ball. He had decked himself in a grand manner. He signalled to me with his eyes. He spoke flirtatiously.

King : Umm. Who? Somanath?

Neelamma : Yes, your Somanath! Do you know what he said? "Your husband is a decrepit old man. A mere honeycomb without the large bee, sheer refuse sans the juice. He said that I was the parrot who sat on his palm, and so saying, grabbed my arm, my lord. I told him not to come close. He touched me. He said I alone was his pearl necklace and was about to embrace me. I wriggled away saying I would get the plate of betel leaves and nuts... Should I still stay alive? Please give me some poison, my lord. Or permit me to jump to my death off the great Rudra rock.

King : Is this true, Neela? That my Somanath would do such a vile thing?

Neelamma : What else am I saying? Am I talking in my sleep? Didn't I forewarn you that you would not believe me? You don't trust me. You would rather believe that man who spoilt my life!

King : I do believe you, Neela. But… but…

Neelamma : He said a son could ride a horse his father had sat on, and that a son could eat off a plate the father had eaten from. These foul ears of mine heard such talk. I pleaded with him not to wallow in such sinfulness. He screamed and charged like a lustful pig. He guffawed and danced like Keechaka. Here… doesn't this turban belong to your son? He left it behind in haste. It's my sheer luck! I have at least this much by way of evidence. Is this enough for you to begin believing me?

King : Hmm? The turban is Somu's, no doubt about it! If this is not a sign of the end of life, what is it? O God! Why did you let my Somu's mind get corrupted thus?

Neelamma : Why blame God? Give the punishment that is due to a culprit. Otherwise I am no more your wife. Permit me to live as your daughter-in-law.

King : Will I spare a viper that spews venom in the plate one eats off, Neela? He must have developed such a wicked mind now because he is gripped by a sense of his impending death. His innards are pierced by a golden knife! Neela, stop worrying. Realise that the culprit will not escape his doom. Is it possible to spare the scoundrel who challenges his father?

Neelamma : Do that, my lord. Until I see the smoke rise from his burning funeral pyre, there's no pacifying my heart-burn.

[Darkness on stage.]

Scene Twelve

[Lakkana and Chenni are talking in a corner of the palace.]

Lakkana : Why do you look so crestfallen, Chenni?

Chenni : All the labour's lost. We planned something. But the very opposite has happened. Who can fathom the divine sport?

Lakkana : Didn't I tell you we should not proceed with those tricks? Where was the need for that ball-game there?

Chenni : What can I say? I couldn't bear to see the queen's plight. So I came to you. Now when I think of it I feel we shouldn't have done what we did.

Lakkana : You too were foolishly enticed by that idea. Queen Neelamma too reached out to grasp the star in the firmament to adorn her hair with! Can such a thing ever happen?

Chenni : That's true. I now feel I should have doused her burning desire with a splash of cold water on her body.

Lakkana : Can't you understand even this? Had you nipped the tender sprouting of her desire in the bud, it would have shrivelled and shrunk like a diseased shoot.

Chenni : Perhaps what we say is true. But then, it was never that easy for the queen's craving to be put out. Can you dam a monsoon estuary with a palm frond as gate?

Lakkana : And now on the whole, someone or the

other has been washed away in the flood, right?

Chenni : Exactly why I feel a turmoil within me. The queen is so vengeful she couldn't grasp what she coveted that she has turned into a serpent whose tail has been stomped on. And now the horrible disease that is plaguing her mind has found a dwelling place in the king's mind as well! And now who can say what calamity will befall as a result of his excessive rage?

Lakkana : Don't we know that our king's intellect and ears too are susceptible to gossip and slander? Does he even have the strength to cross the limits set by the words of his beloved young queen?

Chenni : I wonder what other disastrous things might befall this palace! My body trembles at the thought! O God, what divine lightning have you struck our kingdom with?

Lakkana : What can we possibly do, Chenni? It is the divine act of the *daiva* that has caused it all. Still, I will take Manjana along with me and meet the minister. Let's see if it bears any fruit.

Chenni : Fine, go then. Lord Somanatha himself must show the way.

[They leave.]

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Scene Thirteen

[Chouta king's chamber for reflection. The king and the minister are talking.]

Minister : I hear you ordered my immediate appearance before your august presence!

King : Yes, Minister. I had to summon you in a hurry.

Minister : Your Highness looks wan. Perhaps the hunting expedition over hills and forest has tired you out.

King : *Che*! *Che*! Romping through the forest and hunting only gives you an exhilarating feeling. How can that make me weary? It is not a matter of body being fatigued, Minister.

Minister : I do not understand what you say, my lord.

King : By the way, cancel the buffalo-race for kings, the festive levelling of the fields before transplantation, and the *Kola* performance. Stop all arrangements for these.

Minister : Some thought must be agitating Your Highness' mind. I entreat you to open up and speak.

King : How am I to speak, Minister? The tongue refuses to move. I had a dream this afternoon while I closed my eyes to sleep for a while.

Minister : Did you see something in the dream that scared your Royal Highness?

King : It isn't fear. Rather, my mind is in turmoil, and my body is ablaze.

Minister : What did you see, O king?

King : I saw a dog snatch and eat the ritual rice offered to God. Can such a terrible wrong happen?

Minister : After all you only saw it in a dream, didn't you, my lord? The mind is deceived by the dream. Can such dreams ever come true?

King : There's absolutely no doubt that this is true, Minister. You aren't someone who wouldn't comprehend these things. Don't you understand what the dream implies?

Minister : We mustn't associate one thing with another, my lord. Otherwise some terrible calamity could take place.

King : The calamity has indeed taken place, Minister.

Minister : I cannot fully comprehend the purport of your words, my lord. I request you to explain everything to me.

King : If I tell you what took place, you might not believe me, Minister. I couldn't get myself to believe it at first either.

Minister : Truth will not pass away till it is believed, O king.

King : This thing cannot be thought of even in a dream, Minister. The dog found an opportunity when I went on the hunting expedition and its mouth was on the ritual food for God... Fine, I will explain it, Minister. What's the use of concealing it and speaking about it? My life is spoilt; a thunderbolt has struck my peaceful and prosperous flower-garden!

Minister : I cannot understand the head or tail of this, Lord.

King : Why hide from you, Minister? I believe my son Somanath entered my young queen Neelamma's chamber in my absence.

Minister : If one goes to the house of the stepmother, would that be an offence, Your Majesty?

King : It wouldn't be wrong if one went to the stepmother as a loving son. But I heard that this one asked to eat off my dining plate.

Minister : Oh?

King : Yes, Minister. I hear he leapt and charged like a lustful bull that has just grown horns and is out of its mind. What am I to say, Minister? I hear he touched my queen's upper garment. Should I still stay alive? Can that sinner be permitted to roam the earth alive?

Minister : The king needs to calm down.

King : Does the word calm have any significance, Minister? It is as if your heart is spliced with the very sword you kept to safeguard your head. It is as if the kitten you petted, fed milk to, and reared with great fondness should become a blood-thirsty tiger, mouth wide open to attack human beings. My blood is boiling, Minister.

Minister : One mustn't let anger take charge of the mind, my lord. Such things must be witnessed first-hand, and the accused be caught red-handed. At times, even that which our eyes see could turn out to be false. I do not believe this story in its

entirety, my lord. Do calm down a little, and reflect over this matter in peace, O king.

King : May your peace burn to ashes! Do you advocate peace even in such circumstances, Minister? You can believe it, or leave it. But you will have to carry out the command of the palace.

Minister : I am sorry. What does Your Highness command?

King : Kill Somanath secretly. He ought to be impaled with a pike in public! But what's to be done? The face of the Chouta king will be blackened. Therefore finish him without anyone coming to know of it.

Minister : How can Your Highness rend apart an umbrella after just one rainfall? Have pity and give me a chance. I will go to the root of it and dig around to see. The truth has to see the light of day! If Somanath is found guilty he will have to lose his head as punishment. But in case he is innocent then it would be a travesty of justice, wouldn't it?

King : Minister, I have already gone to the very base of justice. So there's no need for you to dig up matters again! Don't speak in favour of Somanath. Do what you have been told to.

Minister : Just in case I do obey my lord's order, what will the fate of our kingdom be? A kingdom sans Somanath is like Ayodhya without Rama. A kingdom's fort without the main gate. A buffalo-race field minus the ornamental ritual pole.

King : All that is false, Minister. You cannot make a curry with just one chilli, you see. The plant that you watered well and nurtured, presuming it to be sugarcane turned out to be a mere marsh plant. Such a breed should not be spared.

Minister : Nevertheless, when our enemies find an opportune time and attack our kingdom who is the great hero that bravely puffs out his chest and protects the glory and honour of our kingdom? There will be a time when other kings and lords come forth transgressing all limits and clamour and raise a cry at our border like the heightened mischief caused by spineless foxes in a forest devoid of tigers and leopards.

King : Why take stock now, of things that might happen in future? I will look into those affairs when they happen. You will obey my order now.

Minister : My mind calls my attention to the fact that prince Somanath, the child who was born after you made a vow to Lord Somanath, and who is so valiant as to come forward to give up his life if need be for the sake of justice, and who looks upon other women as he would his own mother, would never stoop to do such a sinful thing. Still, the king's command is important. One must bow one's head before it!

King : Now you come round! Finish the work as soon as possible.

[Darkness on stage.]

Scene Fourteen

[Neelamma's chamber. The glow on her face has dimmed.]

Chenni : *Akka*, you look so worried. You haven't drunk milk. Nor have you eaten fruits.

Neelamma : What's to be gained anymore from eating and drinking, Chenni? Why bother anymore with thoughts of this body?

Chenni : Don't say that, *Akka*. You are the very centre of our prosperity. You are the treasure-trove of all our fortune. Your face should not droop.

Neelamma : When the taproot of a tree is chopped off can the leaf be stopped from wilting?

Chenni : You are still thinking about the past. I can understand your pain. But what's the use of unravelling the knot of a story that's over and done with?

Neelamma : Chenni, all that I longed for has turned to dust. Now what fortune should I live for? It is said that the king has ordered Somanath's head to be cut off. Naturally. *Aiyyo*, Chenni, I wonder what demon entered the recesses of my mind! I have turned into an evil spirit after being swayed by the torch-lit wild dance in my mind. I have turned into an ogress, out to drink the blood of Somu, who's the apple of everyone's eye. I gave in to my anger and fell into a sinful pit.

Chenni : Calm down, *Akka*. What can we do about the misfortune of the king's son? He kicked away the beloved golden plate

with his left leg and walked off. He spat at and dismissed the heavenly blossom that came into his hand as if it were worse than rubbish under his feet. He is reaping the fruit of his act now.

Neelamma : I desired the fruit in the sky though I couldn't reach out to get it, Chenni. My mind tried to ride a mad horse. When I failed to get Somanath for myself, I set the king's mind ablaze by spouting everything that came into my head. I hated Somanath and grudged him his very life. I set our precious palace ablaze. I filled the pouch in my garment with slaked lime and jumped into the water!... I would have at least been able to behold him. Will I ever be able to set eyes on him henceforth, Chenni? I am a sinner, Chenni. A terrible sinner!

Chenni : What's to be gained by worrying about the past? We must walk along the path shown by God, mustn't we?

Neelamma : I have forfeited the one I perceived as my god and lost my way in my mad rampage. My days of happiness in this world are over, Chenni. For whatever it is worth, I have only the other world as my fate henceforth.

Chenni : Don't say such things, *Akka.* It's quite natural for the mind to be distressed for a few days. At least drink a little milk, *Akka.*

Neelamma : I don't want anything now, Chenni. Do not press me. I wish to remain alone for now. I do not feel happy talking to anyone.

Don't feel sad.

Chenni : No, *Akka*. Do wash off your sorrow at least once, and see that it abates. I shall leave.

[She leaves.]

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Scene Fifteen

[The king is in Neelamma's chamber. The queen is lying on her bed, very pensive. The king is seated on the chair beside it. Chenni comes in.]

Chenni : The minister has come, Your Highness. He wishes to know if he can meet you.

King : [Nods to signal he can come in.]

Minister : [Comes in slowly. He has a bundle in his hand.] Your Highness, I have executed your order and returned.

King : Oh?

Minister : Your Majesty's command is fulfilled. Here's the gold that was worn by Somanath. Here is the sickle that was forever dancing in his hand, the one with a gold hilt, inlaid with pearls and diamonds. Here is his ornamental shawl embroidered with golden lace. Here is his silk garment, his fawn-coloured turban...

King : What? What did you say, Minister?

Minister : I have returned after fulfilling Your Majesty's command.

King : Have you done it so fast and returned?

What did you do?

Minister : It was Your Majesty's order that Somanath's head be severed from the trunk by tomorrow. The order was executed flawlessly. I returned promptly to inform Your Majesty and give joy to my lord's mind... Here's the packet as proof of the demonic work I undertook.

King : What is that, Minister?

Minister : This is the bundle that Queen Neelamma and the king desired to have. This is the ball of the sinner's head that played the game of ball mischievously... See it carefully. [He unfolds a red cloth covering a head bathed in blood, and displays it.]

King : [Sees with widened eyes. His head seems to reel.] *Aiyyo*! What have you done, Minister? What have you done? *Aiyyo*, my son, Somanath!

[As he is about to fall Neelammaji supports him. She keeps looking at the head with a contorted face and covers her eyes with her hands.]

[Darkness on stage.]

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Scene Sixteen

Narrator : There is no trace of the Chouta scion Somanatha and all the subjects of the kingdom are shrouded in a pall of gloom. Their hearts have dried up like fields sans water. The enthusiasm and the joy of playing sports and games has waned. The swords, maces, lances and shields lie unused in the gymnasium. The youth no longer step proudly into the sea. The royal courtyard is overgrown with thorns and shrubs. The beautiful palace is covered with soot and dust. The pole in the temple of Lord Somanath has fallen down. At times, when the whole kingdom is enveloped in darkness, a beam of radiant light is seen. A deep, reprimanding voice causing horripilation can be heard in the pitch darkness. The revered deity of the kingdom descends on a white horse. There are reports of miracles taking place here and there. New episodes get added to this tale and it keeps growing.

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Scene Seventeen

[Darkness; a traveller and his wife are walking along a hilly road, carrying a flaming torch.]

Ramanna : How soon time has flown! I had hoped to reach Mudipu before nightfall.

Subbi : I cannot see a single human soul along this hill-road. I feel scared.

Ramanna : If only you had walked on a little faster we could have reached the frontyard of Sankanna in Mudipu! You take such mincing steps like a new bride. I cannot keep pace with you. My legs seem to be tied up.

Subbi : You are a man. You can stride along any beaten track and reach with speed. How can I run along with you by my side? By the way, where have we reached? How far off is Sankanna's house?

Ramanna : If we scale one hill and descend it, we will reach the place.

Subbi : Yet another hill to climb? I won't be able to. Oh! Isn't that a raised platform over there? Shall we rest there for a while?

Ramanna : This is what happens when I tag you along! Why undertake the ritual of bathing in the sacred pilgrim-pond on a new moon day if you haven't got the strength to walk? Hmm. Let's sit for a little while on that platform. I too feel an insipid taste in my mouth. It might help to chew some betel leaf and nut! This torch too has begun flickering.

Subbi : Oh! This must be a sacred platform.

Someone has lit a lamp here and kept an earthen pot of water. God bless them! [They take the pot and drink from it.] It looks like someone is approaching.

Ramanna : Must be some wayfarer.

[A short, sturdy man comes. He stares at them and sits on one side of the platform.]

Man : Who's that?

Ramanna : It's us.

Man : Where are you from? Where are you going?

Ramanna : We are from Vitla. We have set out to bathe in the sacred pond at Someshwar on the new moon day.

Man : Where are you going in this darkness?

Ramanna : We intend to spend the night at Sankanna's place in Mudipu, and continue our journey at dawn. Here, do you want to eat some betel leaf and nut?

Man : I shall eat some. [Eats it. He looks at Subbi.]

Ramanna : Seems like you belong to this place?

Man : Yes, yes. I belong here. My house is close to Sankanna's.

Ramanna : Is it so? It's a good thing then. Let's walk together. This torch-flame too has died out.

Man : I'll tell you something. Don't feel hurt. This lady has so much gold round her neck, hasn't she? You have set out on this hill in such darkness, with all that gold on her, haven't you? You have some nerve!

Ramanna : Our kingdom is not haunted by such robbery, is it? We have placed our faith in

God and set out.

Man : It's true that there was not much fear of thieves in the Chouta kingdom. But they say trouble-makers are on the rise now and there are cases of theft being reported here and there. After the death of prince Somanath there's no one to challenge those who plunder and kill!

Subbi : *Aiyyo*! I feel so frightened!

Man : Don't be afraid. Do a thing.

Ramanna : What?

Man : Slip off all the gold worn by this woman round her neck, wrists, and ears, and keep it here.

Ramanna : Gold… Why take off the gold?

Man : That means you have no idea about the matter? There's a spirit here. It's called the bride-spirit. Women must take off all their gold, including the chain of black beads, and keep it here. You must not doubt it. It's an old custom.

Ramanna : I have never heard of such a custom.

Man : Well, you have heard now, haven't you? Hmm. Quick. Take it off.

Subbi : I shall join my palms before the spirit, from this very spot!

Man : That won't do. Why do you do these childish pranks? Don't play these tricks with the spirit. Now be obedient and keep the gold here.

[Subbi looks here and there.]

Man : [In a gruff voice.] What? Didn't you hear me? Will you take it off, or not? Or do you want my hand on your neck?

Ramanna : *Aiyyo*, holy lord! Just who are you, man? Why are you yelling? Why are you frightening us? Is it right to plunder wayfarers in this manner?

Man : Bundle up all that fake sorrow of yours! Take off all that gold. What's there in that bundle? There must be the money you have pledged to give to the temple, right? If you want your lives spared, then give it up meekly. Or else… [Displays a cudgel.]

Ramanna and Subbi : [Both scream out that they are being killed. The man claps his hands. Now another man comes running. The two of them catch the couple, tie them up to the tree at the platform, and gag them. They loot them and take off all the gold and money. They laugh aloud and are about to decamp with all the loot when a horse's hooves can be heard. All at once a bearded man comes running.]

Bearded man : Who's it that dares to do this? Rogues who waylay innocent travellers and loot them! Keep it there! Do you think you are answerable to no one in this kingdom?

Man : And just who are you? Are you man enough to dare challenge us?

Bearded man : Stray dogs that steal! Recognise me by this! [He strikes the two of them with a rattan cane. They fling the bundle and flee. He then unties the couple and hands their bundle over to them.]

Ramanna : You came, God-like, in this pitch darkness and saved us. Who are you? We had given

up all hopes of coming out alive.

Bearded man: Take courage. Can anyone smudge the lifeline drawn for us by God? Let that be. Where do you have to go?

Ramanna : We are from Vitla. We have set out to have a bath in the sacred pond at Someshwar. We thought we would spend the night at Sakanna's house in Mudipu. We sat at this sacred platform to eat some betel leaves.

Bearded man : A sinful act would have taken place at a sacred spot! God did not let that happen. Go forth. I shall escort you till there.

Subbi : May God bless you! *Aiyyo*! My heart shudders even now to think of it!

Bearded man : Don't be scared, Mother. Why fear when I am around?

Ramanna : May we ask who you are?

Bearded man : I am called the king's horseman. I have the habit of riding to every town and village on horseback. I am not one to tolerate such crimes. Neither am I someone who will stay put in one place.

Ramanna : Where are you from? Whose son are you?

Bearded man : Wherever I go is the place I belong to. The earth and the sky are my parents. Never mind all that. I shall see you off at that house at the earliest. Come!

[They leave.]

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Scene Eighteen

[The inner chamber of the queen. Neelamma is lying on the cot, leaning worriedly against a large pillow. Chenni is fanning her.]

Chenni : *Akka*, how's the burning sensation in your limbs? Should I give you some medicine?

Neelamma : No, Chenni. Why should I take the medicine?

Chenni : Drink some lime juice, *Akka*.

Neelamma : Why do you press me so? Is there any cure for the pain in my body? I am a mere beast trapped in the vice-grip of the hanging roots of the tree.

Chenni : *Akka*, you are the queen. You are highly educated, and have great knowledge. I don't need to tell you anything. And yet, how can I desist from speaking? I cannot bear to see your plight. Is it right for you to keep pining away, languishing over the past, *Akka*? As human beings born into this world, shouldn't we learn to walk in tandem with time?

Neelamma : What are you saying, Chenni?

Chenni : Doesn't the stream that dries up and is barely alive in summer fill up and overflow in the rainy season? Doesn't the tree that sheds its leaves in autumn put forth tender foliage in spring?

Neelamma : I know all that, Chenni... Such words are very easy to utter... Forget it. Last night I had a dream, Chenni. *Abbaba*! My heart quails at the very thought of it!

Chenni : What did you see in the dream, *Akka*?

Neelamma : Somanath's neck had been cut, and there

was a blood-bath all around. The river of blood was flowing towards the sea in the west. I saw the rock of Rudra foaming with the splash of blood. I saw the western sky splattered with the crimson hue... That head came floating in the sea. It came up to my hand. Its eyes kept glowering at me. It then bared its teeth and began guffawing at me. My ears turned deaf with the uproarious laughter. I took it and flung it away. It fell into the open field in front of the palace. Ten to twenty young men kicked it around like a ball. It bounded and fell into the pouch of my garment. When I shook it off and stood up instead of the head it was Somanath, larger than life, laughing right in front of me. He said, "Though you killed me, I am not among those who die!" My tongue seemed paralysed and I could not speak. He climbed down the stairs in a trice, sat astride a horse, and rode swiftly before vanishing! I woke up just then, Chenni.

Chenni : Isn't the dream a fabrication of the mind? Forget it, *Akka*. Do not think of it.

Neelamma : How am I to forget, Chenni?...Chenni... that turban... Where have you kept my Somanath's turban? Bring it to me.

Chenni : You will cry ceaselessly in intense grief if you set eyes on it. So don't do it, *Akka*.

Neelamma : No, Chenni. My mind will feel immensely relieved if I see it once, and hug it to my bosom. Where is it? Bring it.

Chenni : Fine, *Akka*, I shall get it. [Goes in and returns.] *Akka*, the king is coming along.

Neelamma : *Aiyyo*! He won't even let me sit for a while by myself! I wonder why he comes in this manner and eats my very life! My ill-luck! [The king enters. Neelamma makes an effort to stand up.]

King : Oh, oh, Neela, don't get up and tire yourself. Your ill-health has thoroughly agitated my mind. No matter where I go I think of you. How are you now, Neela? [He comes close to her and sits. He caresses her.]

Neelamma : [Not liking it] Unbearable headache, my lord. It increases when I talk. That was why I was sleeping quietly.

King : Shall I call the court physician, Neela? He will identify the ailment and administer the right medicine.

Neelamma : I still have the medicine brought the other day, my lord. The pain might stop on its own after a while.

King : Somehow, I want to see you cured of your ailment at the earliest so that you will laugh and dance once again.

Neelamma : It's true the king has to listen to the sickness and sorrows of the palace inmates. But it is far more important that he think of the welfare of the kingdom. The affairs of the kingdom should not take a back seat because you worry so much about a minor illness of mine.

King : That's true. We have ministers and generals to take care of the affairs of the kingdom. Right now it is your illness that has become a big concern for me. I tell you frankly, Neela – my mind tells me that

it is thousand times better to sit beside you and speak a few precious words filled with love than to be seated on the throne of authority merely because it symbolises the wealth and glory of ruling the kingdom.

Neelamma : I do not know what I should say. My head is splitting. I wonder if the *Giraav* deity for epilepsy has entered my head!

Chenni : [Chenni comes.] O great lord, the guard at the door asks that the king be persuaded to allow a message to be brought in his royal presence.

King : What? Message, did he say? From where? Wherever it is from, to hell with it! I haven't come here now to entertain any letter. Let him give it to the minister. Let the minister give a reply to it. [Chenni leaves.]

Neelamma : If you sideline the affairs of the kingdom thus, is it right, my lord? That letter must be of extreme urgency. There's no reason why it should be brought here otherwise.

King : In any case the minister must be made aware of it, right? He will read it and apprise me of it. Chenni... Where is that drink?

Neelamma : Chenni... Don't give him too much. He hasn't the strength as before.

Chenni : Alright, *Akka*.

King : What are you saying, Neela? Can't I withstand even this much? Ha ha! Don't say such things. Chenni... Bring it here. Pour it. [Chenni pours it...He drinks it slowly.] Neela, what would the state

of this body be, with your lovely face before me, if not for the container of this invigorating drink? It is from the very frothing, dancing contents of this vessel that lovely dreams take wing and leap forth to make one giddy-headed, and which soothe and caress the body.

Chenni : [Goes up to the door and returns.] Great lord, the minister has come; he awaits permission to present himself before Your Majesty.

King : He had to come right now, did he? Won't even let me refresh my weary self a wee bit in my own palace! What a nuisance! Tell him I shall be there at the council-chamber in a short while.

Chenni : [Goes and comes back.] He says it is a very urgent matter and he has to request the king to grant him immediate permission to speak in your presence. He says it cannot be put off.

King : Hmm. Then let him in!

[Chenni goes to the door. The minister comes in.]

Minister : Greetings to Your Majesty. It bothers me that I had to trouble you while you were relaxing. But this matter needs to be addressed in a hurry. That's why I came rushing in.

King : What's the matter?

Minister : The Banga king of Kudla has written a letter, my lord. He says that the Portuguese who folded up their sails and bolted off after their defeat last time, are advancing again with their army. It is reported that their sailing vessels have crossed Bhatkal

and Byndoor, and reached Malpe and Udyavar. My lord, he has requested you to send the General of the Chouta army to come to the aid of the Banga kingdom to confront the foreign fleet of ships.

King : Is the army of the white-faced foreigners back yet again? Have they set out to shake the joints of the throne of the Banga king? Let him fend for himself. Why should we push our army into the mouth of those foreign vessels?

Minister : Does it take long for the fire on the loft to reach the roof, my lord? If the Portuguese swallow the Banga kingdom, how long will it take them to set foot on the Chouta kingdom? Isn't that possible after defeating the Banga army?

King : Let us build a fence round our own garden. Why should we set out to fence in the entire village?

Minister : Even if we wish to fence our garden we do need to have a wooden post, don't we? When the inner bolt of our main door is broken what are we to do?

King : Minister, do not dig up the past. Don't remind me of Somanath.

Neelamma : My lord, it is not right to be indolent at such a time. Will you now slip away after having seen so many bloody battles once? The minister is right. It cannot be said with certainty that the dark cloud looming over the Banga king today will not spread over our kingdom tomorrow. We will have to give a positive response to Banga's request. The flower offered to the revered

deity of Ullal kingdom must not wither.

King : The time when I would fight on the battlefield is long past. Nonetheless, if the queen tells me to, I will take up the sword again.

Minister : Your Majesty need not come to the battlefield. It is enough if you give the command. General Sankanna will be there. There are soldiers strong enough to wage war. When I said that we have no wooden stake to fence the garden, it was just an expression, that's all. When it's the question of the pride and glory of the kingdom, you can rest assured that there will be no deficiency…

King : That's so, right? In that case make preparations for the next course of action.

Minister : Alright, Your Highness. [He leaves.]

[The sound of musical instruments announcing the commencement of war has begun in the background, and the loud din and clamour of battle is heard. Some minutes later the intensity of the tumultuous din decreases, and musical instruments heralding victory are heard.]

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Scene Nineteen

[All the people have assembled in the royal court of the Chouta king of Ullal in great pomp and celebration. There is a radiant glow of victory on every face.]

King : Minister, the Portuguese cloud of gloom in the west that loomed over the Banga

kingdom has somehow blown off. What seemed like a heavy downpour has vaporised like mist. The honour and dignity of our Chouta kingdom is intact and our fame has spread around.

Minister : All thanks to the grace of that great Somanath!

King : That of course is true! But no matter how much we praise the prowess of our young men, it will never suffice. By the way, who's this man called 'horseman' who led our army as its general and defeated the Portuguese swarm with his might?

Minister : It is our good fortune that our kingdom has been blessed with someone like him. He is the valiant hero sent forth by Lord Somanath of the Rudra rock to steer us to victory!

King : I have heard people say 'horseman', ''horseman.' I have also heard a few stories of his courageous exploits. Who is he? Where is he from? How did he come to our kingdom?

Minister : I do not know where he is from. When our army set out to give battle he came from, heaven knows where, and said that he wished to join the army in the battle. He swore that he had taken an oath before Lord Somanath that he would pledge his very body if necessary in order to guard the honour and glory of our kingdom. He came with us. He struck like a bolt of lightning at the war-front and did not give any scope to the Portuguese

army to advance an inch. He let fly fire-tipped arrows at the sailing vessels of the Portuguese demons and charred them. All that happened on the battle-field is known to Your Majesty.

King : Even though I know of it my ears long to hear the tale of our victory again and yet again. Let that be. It is appropriate that I meet the brave tiger cub who strung a tassel to the glory of our crown, right?

Minister : Your desire is warranted, my lord. It is a matter of joy to invite the king's horseman who held aloft the glory of our victorious army, to the palace hall. I have already spoken to him about it. He refused to come at first. He said he found the air around the palace suffocating. He agreed to come finally when I kept persisting.

King : Really? Did he agree to come to the royal court? Good. Then bring him here quickly. [The minister goes out and brings the king's horseman in. The young man with the beard and moustache proudly enters the assembly hall.]

Minister : The king's horseman has come before your august presence, my lord.

Horseman : [Bows his head.]

King : O horseman, take a seat. My ears have had their fill of your heroic exploits on the battle-field. And now my eyes have had their fill too. I am very pleased. You have brightened the light of the Chouta honour and greatness. I do not know if I can ever praise you enough.

Horseman : [Silently joins his palms.]

King : All those who have assembled in this royal court are extremely happy. We need to express the joy of our kingdom in our royal assembly appropriately, don't we, Minister?

Minister : Everyone in this assembly feels gratified by the fine display of the horseman's valour and kindness that steered us to victory. Now we need the permission of Your Royal Highness to ask the king's horseman to leave.

King : What are you saying, Minister? Should the fulsome praise of our royal court be limited to the utterance of mere words? Shouldn't we be offering gifts that befit his honour and that of our royal family? Shouldn't we honour him publicly before this assembly with grand ear-ornaments, wrist-bangle, chain for the forearm, a shawl of variegated colours for his shoulder, and a medal for gallantry round his neck? Shouldn't we wave the ritual lamp round him?

Minister : He isn't the kind who gapes with desire at all these things. He is someone who steps in as a maternal uncle would to pregnant women in peril; he is the one who steps forward to stomp on injustice when it sprouts. He is never a person who expects anything from anyone.

King : You know every move of the horseman's and each aspect of his character. You are the one doing all the talking on his behalf.

He doesn't speak a word. O horseman, from where have you risen like a gallant star in our kingdom? Where were you born and brought up? Where did you learn the skills of warfare?

Horseman : [Sees the minister's face.]

King : Minister, among all people there will be a few who have slight deficiencies. This poor horseman here – is unable to speak?

Minister : He is not a dumb man lacking the faculty of speech, Your Majesty. But the horseman isn't enthused enough to speak.

King : Regarding what?

Minister : My lord, this horseman who brims with joy, girding himself up to lay down his life for our kingdom, finds his own life a dark crematorium.

King : I find this strange! I cannot figure out the head or tail of what the minister says.

Minister : Your Highness, this horseman, born and brought up in this very land, has fallen prey to a grave injustice done to him. So he has no heart for the honour and ornaments to decorate his valour.

King : It looks like the minister conceals something while speaking. Let the horseman open his mouth and explain things.

Minister : O horseman, I suppose you heard what the king said?

Horseman : Great lord!

King : [Surprised.] Ah! Whose voice is this?

Minister : Are you surprised, my lord?

King : This is my Somanath's voice, isn't it?

Horseman : It is Somanath's voice, and it is Somanath's

body as well. [He pulls off the beard, moustache, and turban.]

King : Ah! What's this? [Stands transfixed with amazement.]

Minister : The king must calm down. This is indeed Somanath in the flesh, and not his ghost or spirit!

[Neelamma suddenly gets up and goes in.]

King : O Lord Somanath! What is this divine act of yours? Is it true? Where am I? Minister, how did this happen? Nothing seems to make sense to this senile head of mine. How's this possible? Just how?

Minister : Yes, Your Majesty, it was not possible. You were caught in the noose of your delusional love. But I thought it was not right for this blessed scion of the Chouta kingdom to die so unjustly. I was caught in the whirlpool of the idea that I had to somehow safeguard the norms of justice; and in this sense I have deceived Your Highness. I saved Somanath's head. I had no other way out.

King : I wouldn't say you deceived me, Minister. But...

Minister : O king, Somanath has never strayed from the right path. Sin has simply no place to walk in his footsteps. He is the fruit of the auspicious tree in our kingdom, the door to our fortune, the very flag of justice!

Horseman : Let us say that all that happened was for our own good. Father, your pure-minded, innocent son prostrates before the great throne that upholds justice and righteousness in the kingdom. Clear the

sediment in your mind, and bless me. If you still think I am guilty, then chop my head off.

King : Somanath! My Somanath! [Hugs him.] May you have a long life and live for a thousand years, my son... I had never thought that such a day as this would dawn in my life! My heart is pounding with a flood of joy! My body is trembling, and I feel goose-bumps all over! I simply do not know what to say... Minister, the head you displayed to me the other day?

Minister : Your Majesty, that was the head of Talapady Thammaiah, a close friend of Somanath's, who came forward very cheerfully to lay down his life for his beloved friend. He resembled Somanath. Though we tried hard to dissuade him he wouldn't listen. The noble man kept smiling even as he offered up his own head!

King : O God! What a great sacrifice! Minister, invite his parents and siblings if any, and make them an offering of gifts and free land. Install an arch at the door of the temple to commemorate Thammaiah's brave act. Inscribe his name on stone.

Minister : As you wish, my lord. [Chenni comes running from within.]

Chenni : A terrible thing has happened in the inner chamber, Your Majesty!

King : What? What?

Chenni : Queen Neelamma has swallowed her diamond ring, Your Majesty, and is writhing in pain!

King : Ah, Chenni, what did you say?... Diamond ring... I had lovingly put that diamond ring on her little finger! Neela! Neela! What have you done? [He rushes into her chamber. The others also run hurriedly after him.]

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Final Scene

Narrator : My friends who have been watching this play – I had begun this play after inviting you to joyfully witness the splendour and beauty of Dasara celebrations. But the turns and twists of the story took us somewhere else. All of you heaved a sigh of relief that the king's son, Somanath, was alive after all. I do not wish to chafe you by raising the dust of a dark and tragic tale at this point. Aren't you intelligent enough to comprehend matters? It is quite natural that each story, each anxiety, each life, and each personality will have its own unique ending in this world. But meanwhile, where is the right answer to the undying questions that keep rising deep within our mind? Where? Where?

[The lights slowly dim out.]

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr Chetan Someshwara for permitting me to translate this work, and Sri Taranath Gatti for his support and encouragement. I thank Dr Alwyn D'Sa for the foreword. Sri Abhishek J. Shetty from Radio Sarang has helped me understand the nuances of Tulu and I thank him for his insights. I am grateful to Rev. Dr Robert William D'Silva and Dr Mahalinga Bhat for reviewing this book.

Sylvia Rego

The three plays in this book reflect the rich Tuluva culture seen in folklore. The display of power, exploration of conflictual and transgressive desire and the exploits of valour and masculinity become evident against the backdrop of a feudal agrarian world order. The spaces available for challenging a symmetrical gender equations are creatively reimagined in the plays. The divine and the mundane, *Daivas* and mortals, react and respond in fascination ways. The regional ethos springs to life at the level of rituals, beliefs and practices sustained in *paddanas,* proverbs and folk-sports. The playwright brings all the characters to life with his sensitive portrayal of human nature and motivations.

Prof. Amrutha Someshwara is a towering figure in Tulu and Kannada with immense contribution in the world of folklore, theatre, literature and culture, and research. His work on Tulu paddanas, Yakshagana prasangas, and bhootharadhane help him to steer clear of stereotypical representations in his plays, and show his sensitivity in representing the agonies, conflicts, and joys of human brings. He worked as professor of Kannada at St Aloysius College, St Philomena College, and as Head of the Department at Vivekananda College.

Some of his literary, dramatic, dance ballet, and folkloristic contributions include *Theerada There, Nandalikeya Nandadeepa, Arivina Harikararu, Sapta Manthrikeyaru, Bali Chakravarthi, Tambila, Rangitha, Ullaloda Veera Rani Abbakka Devi, Kodimara,* apart from many more.

The innumerable awards he has received include those from the Kendra sahitya Akademi, Karnataka Tulu Sahitya Akademi, Karnataka Rajyotsava award, Rashtrakavi Govind Pai award, and others.

Dr Sylvia Rego is a professor of English at St Aloysius (Deemed to be University), Mangaluru. She has written *The Tree-Spirit and other Konkani Folktales.* She has translated Beary folktales to English. She has also translated three Konkani plays of Cha Fra S'Costa, and a Kannada novel by Na D'Souza, *Ten Houses around a Church.* Apart from translation, her interests are folklore, Gender studies, and Postcolonial Studies.

Tharanatha Gatti Kapikad
Chairperson
Karnataka Tulu Sahithya Academy

Karnataka Tulu Sahithya Academy
Tulu Bhavana, Ashoknagara Post
Mangaluru - 575 006

ISBN 978-81-996198-

9 788199 619852 >

Rs. 150